

A Change in History

A HP Fanfiction

Disclaimer: I do not own HP.

Chapter One: A Long Shot

It was a warm sunny day in the Potter household as of July 31, 1986. Squealing came from behind a door and grew into a screech of laughter as the said door flew open violently and a small child came sprinting out, chased closely by a man and woman who were laughing gaily. It was a picture perfect day in the lives of James, Lily, and Chris Potter as the small family raced down the stairs and into the filtered sunshine. However, for one young occupant of the house, the day foretold of nothing but the accustomed loneliness that came with being the eldest child and thus ignored.

Harry Potter looked down out of the small window that he had carved out of the wall in his room and watched sadly as the rest of the Potters danced about the green grass and chased each other. He sat back dejectedly and stared at the wall, as was his wont. Young Harry didn't understand why his parents didn't want him; he'd done everything he could think of to please them. He knew he was inherently magical; the accidentally lit curtains of the dining room that his mother threw a fit over attested to that. All he knew was that they had stopped loving him when his brother was born.

Harry didn't blame Chris; after all, it wasn't his fault that he was the foretold Child of Prophecy who, upon reaching maturity, was destined to bring down the feared Dark Lord Voldemort once and for all. He was still only a baby and thus had no control over what happened. No, Harry blamed the adults. They could have just as easily pinned it on some other child and left him and his baby brother alone.

For you see, it went like this: the Child of Prophecy was foretold to be born 'as the seventh month dies' which would be July, today, in fact. Harry himself had been born this day six years ago; Chris shared his birthday, but only by five years. Harry had always wondered why it was Chris and not him who was the Prophecy Child; his godfather,

Albus Dumbledore, had answered that question when Harry had asked him the last time he had come over.

Flashback

"Uncle Albus?" said a small voice near the open doorway of the sitting room where Albus Dumbledore sat. Albus turned to him with twinkling eyes.

"Ah, Harry! Just who I wanted to see. How are you, my boy?" Harry approached him meekly, something that did not escape the attention of the observant headmaster. Harry edged onto the sofa next to him and looked up at him in cautious curiosity.

"I've been wondering for a while now...Me and Chris have the same birthday. Why is it him and not me?" Albus didn't ask what he meant, for he already knew, and regarded the young boy sharply over the rims of his half moon spectacles as he contemplated what to tell him. Finally, he settled on an answer.

"There is a reason for everything my dear boy; Chris was chosen because he was meant to be chosen. As his brother, you're meant to be there to protect him." With this Albus smiled down at him kindly. "I trust him to your capable hands, Harry. I know you will do good by him and won't let me down." Harry knew this was a dismissal and so slid off the sofa and left the room, thinking on what his godfather had told him.

End Flashback

Everything happens for a reason, huh? He thought morbidly. Then what's the reason for my own family hating me? For indeed, in young Harry's eyes, there was no other way to describe his parent's negligence of him. With his weak grasp of the ways of the world, Harry was certain that, if someone didn't love you, then they hated you. And his parents certainly didn't love him, at least not anymore. If they still loved him, they would read him stories and tuck him in at night like they do with Chris. Mom would make his favorites for every meal of the day and Dad would play Quidditch with him like they did

*with Chris. Bitter resentment filled Harry as he flopped back onto his bed with his hand behind his head, glaring at the ceiling angrily. If they loved me, I'd be down there with them, celebrating **our** birthday instead of just Chris's, he thought sourly. He rolled over onto his side away from the light still streaming into his room and fell into an uneasy slumber. His last thought before darkness claimed his was, I wish I had a family that cared.*

Harry jerked awake hours later. You could no longer hear the squealing outside his window. He looked towards it. It was completely dark outside, except for a bright moon which bathed the ground. Harry scowled and slid out of bed, padding to his door and throwing it open. His stomach growled and he made a beeline for the kitchen, but stopped short as he heard giggling inside and singing. He peered around the edge of the door and looked inside. His gut felt like it had just been punched.

His 'family' was gathered around the kitchen table, silly hats perched on their heads as Lily lowered a towering chocolate (Harry and Chris's favorite flavour) cake onto the table as their singing grew louder.

"Happy Birthday, dear Chris,

Happy Birthday to you..."

Harry blinked back tears as he saw the blissful smiles on their faces. They obviously didn't want him. They didn't even know he was here, or that it was his birthday as well. Harry turned tail and fled. His brain flew into overdrive as he searched his mind frantically for any idea of where to escape the horrible image floating before his vision, but no matter where he went in the house it followed obediently. Finally, Harry could take no more. He flung open the front doors and raced into the night, towards the only place he knew would give him any solace; the forest on the very edge of the property that many people had forgotten about, that no sane person would dare go into for fear of the dangerous creatures that lurked within.

Little did Harry know that he would be getting more than solace tonight.

He ran blindly through the low-hanging branches of the trees on the outskirts of the forest and kept going, not caring if he got lost or worse. It was very difficult to maneuver in this wood; the trees kept together in clumps and little moonlight came through. Normally at this time of night when Harry wished to get away from the house he would hear werewolves and other things, which would always drive him back to the security, if not comfort, of the Potter Manor. But not this night. This night the werewolves and vampires were strangely silent, and there was little reason why. For something far worse than them wandered the forest this night. But Harry, encouraged by the lack of noises instead of cautioned by it, drove on relentlessly until he finally collapsed, miles from his home, in a heap on the ground.

The Dark Lord Voldemort was *not* having a good day at all. First those bungling idiots that dared to call themselves his Death Eaters employed at the Ministry had failed to keep the story of the attack on a small town outside of Liverpool quiet, and was certain to be all over the *Daily Prophet* by morning. The other was that *another* of the bungling idiots in his employ had failed, *yet again*, to retrieve the full recording of the prophecy for him. The torture sessions that had followed had done little to relieve his temper and much to irritate his headache. He rubbed his temple wearily. At this rate it would be years before he got the merest advantage over the muggle-loving fool Dumbledore in this war. He fingered his ebony wand sharply. He needed a temper target badly, and as his luck would have it, he remembered that a certain Potions Master was to visit him tonight to make a personal report.

Voldemort had known it was a smart move to enlist Severus Snape as a direct spy to the old fool's meddling. He got much valuable information for it, no matter how tiring it could inevitably be wringing it verbally from the spy's mouth. It always made him suspicious how hesitant Severus was to give him information on Dumbledore, but he eventually put it down to habit. He had hardly been out of school, what, eight, nine years? He would just have to hone him (via Cruciatus, naturally) to give him all the details. Voldemort smiled wickedly as the said potions master walked into the room and bowed. Yes. Today's report should prove...interesting.

An hour later and the report was over. The Dark Lord leaned back in his elaborate throne and rubbed his temples yet again. This honing business would take more work than he had previously believed. He had just briefly considered giving it up for the night when his trusted familiar, Nagini, slithered into the room. Voldemort hid a smile. He had little doubt as to what Nagini could possibly want.

"Massssssster," she greeted him in a hiss as she snaked her way to his side. Voldemort looked down upon her as he responded, stroking her lightly on the head for a few moments.

"Nagini...how niccce of you to join me." Nagini gazed up at him steadily with jewel yellow eyes.

"Masssster, I wisssshhh to take a trip through your foresssst, but I refusssse to take one of thossse sssimple foolssss with me. Would you care to join me, Masssster?" Voldemort considered her and her request for a moment. What else did he have to do? Besides, he was long overdue for some intelligent company.

"Of courssssse, my dear. Lead the way." He smiled a twisted smile. Maybe this trip would be worth it.

The walk in the forest was, for the most part, silent. Snow had begun to fall even more heavily than it had earlier that evening, despite the sunshine the morning and afternoon had seen. His cloak whipped about his heels and he followed Nagini absently through the trees, glancing about him in disinterest and it was bloody cold out here. He was just about to turn back to head in when he heard Nagini call frantically from somewhere up ahead of him, *"MASSSSSTER!"* Voldemort was at her side immediately and looking down upon a strange site indeed.

Before him, almost completely buried in snow, was a small boy with a head full of messy raven hair. He appeared no older than five or six and was obviously a wizard and a rich one at that, if the silk robes were anything to go by. He looked back at her in disinterest to see her gazing at him in question.

"What ssshould we do, Masssster?" She questioned. Voldemort looked down at the child again. He noticed impassively that he was

turning blue. He shrugged. He didn't really care if the boy lived or died; it was his stupidity that got him here in the first place. He had just turned to go back when he heard a faint, weak hiss behind him that certainly wasn't Nagini.

"W-wait..." Voldemort stopped dead in his tracks and whirled around to stare down at the boy again, who was now moving about slightly. Voldemort narrowed his eyes.

"What did you ssssay?" He hissed, just to prove that the boy hadn't spoken in the tongue of his most honoured ancestor. He was content after a few minutes of pained silence and was about to turn to leave again when the brat responded.

"I ssssaid...(Cough) wait..." He looked to the small boy, certain that he had heard correctly this time, but saw that he had fallen unconscious again. Nagini looked at him excitedly.

"Masssster, it isss another sssspeaker! Another sssspeaker, Masssster! What do we do?" Voldemort knelt down and studied the boy's still form closely, his mind racing a mile per minute.

This boy is obviously of the Slytherin bloodline, he thought. His speaking has proven that much.

Yes, but what are you going to do about it? An annoying voice sneered back as he closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. Great. Now he was hearing voices in his head and arguing with himself. He was sure that that was a sign that this boy was trouble.

You can't just leave him here, the first voice demanded. *He is a speaker! He is a relative!*

And that's exactly why we should get rid of him, the second voice bit back. Voldemort made an effort to ignore both, as he knew that Nagini was awaiting his answer.

He knew that, as a speaker the boy must have Slytherin blood in him. The problem he saw was that he didn't know from which family he had come from, and what they might have taught him.

That's not a problem! He's young, he can still be molded to our path if it's done correctly! The first voice cut in. Voldemort considered this. It was true enough; the boy was young enough to where he would remember his old family...and if the fact that he was out here was any indication, they weren't a very good family, which would work in his favor. And the boy had to be powerful; the wards around this forest kept everyone else away, but this young child had managed to break through with no injuries to his person, from what he could tell. His mind made up, he stood and brushed the snow from his robes and cloak before turning back to the keep.

"Take the boy up to one of the guesssst chamberssss in the keep, Nagini," he threw over his shoulder as he walked away. *"Ssstay with him until he wakessssss then bring him to me. We have ssssomething to...dissscusssss."* And with that he turned and left, his cloak billowing wildly in the snow and wind. Nagini turned to the small child in front of her and used her tail to wipe the snow off of him before gently curling her strong body around him and beginning the long trip of dragging him back home. The child was now, by some unspoken agreement, temporarily in her care and safe. But Nagini couldn't help but think of her master and wonder. For how long?

Chapter One: A Decision Made and a Twist of Fate

As Harry came to consciousness, his first feeling was of warmth. Something soft and smooth, radiating heat, was cushioned beneath him. Harry groaned and cracked one eye open before slowly sitting up, evaluating his surroundings with wide eyes. This certainly wasn't his room, nor was it the cold, snowy forest floor where he had collapsed last night.

For one thing, this room was far larger than the one he had had at the Potter Manor, nor was it decorated with the aggravatingly bright colors of scarlet and gold that adorned the majority of the Potter household. Black curtains that looked to be silk hung imperiously over large, arcing windows that took up the majority of the wall which the bed he was on was against. The floor was made of a concise, dark forest green and obviously well cared for. The walls themselves were a dark color that Harry could not identify, and there were several comfy armchairs in varying shades of blues, greens and black strategically placed around the room. Against the wall to Harry's right was an elegant black marble fireplace, intricate silver gates incrustated with decorative emerald vines closed it off. Fire danced merrily in the grate, and to Harry it seemed out of place in this sinister seeming room. To Harry's left was two doors; Harry didn't want to know where they led, but if he had to guess he would wager they led to a closet and bathroom, respectively. Embedded in the wall directly across from the bed next to another door was a large, ceiling to floor mirror. Harry cautiously slid off the bed (his?) to approach it. He leaned close and inspected it.

Similar to the gates of the fireplace, the frame for the tall, crystal-clear mirror was silver, gilded with the same emerald vines. There was something else, Harry saw on closer inspection. Small gleaming black snake carvings wove delicately around the carved vines. Harry leaned away from the mirror. It made him distinctly uneasy, somehow. Harry turned back to inspect the bed he had awoken upon. A four-poster bed, the tall bed posts were decorated just as the mirror and fireplace were, except instead of silver it was a deep onyx color; dark, malevolent green draping with silver and black tapers hung, carefully placed, on all sides of the bed.

Harry shook his head. He had no idea where he was. His forehead scrunched and his lips thinned as he struggled to recall the events of last night (*was it last night?*), but he only barely managed to summon up a few scratchy images. His family, running about outside...The birthday cake...the forest...

Cold...so cold... Harry couldn't remember anything after that.

But that doesn't explain how I got here, or even where here is he thought. He sighed in frustration and kicked at the floor, ruffling the expensive carpet in the process. Harry couldn't bring himself to care at the moment. *What do I do?* He thought desperately. It was then he noticed that his clothes -the same ones he recalled wearing the previous night- were wrinkled and damp. *Probably from the snow. Alright, first order of business: find a change of clothes.* Harry approached one of the two doors and opened the nearest one. It was a closet, as he had surmised before. *Bingo.*

Harry gaped at the sheer number of clothes in the closet. Robes, nightgowns, boots, shirts, vests, pants, anything he could ever think of was all in here. Harry stumbled in and reverently brushed his hand against one of the nearest articles of clothing. The burgundy robe was soft and smooth under his fingertips. Velvet, he surmised. It had always been Mum's favorite type of cloth.

Harry felt his stomach lurch at the thought of his mother-of the thought of his whole 'family'. Were they worried? Did they even notice he was missing? Questions plagued Harry until he could hardly think straight. He was snapped out of it by a *pop* that came from behind him. He whirled around.

Standing in the middle of the room was a house-elf; Harry had seen them around the house and had even been assigned to do some chores with them whenever he 'misbehaved'. The elf in front of him had round, bobbing ears and large, tennis-ball like eyes the color of the ocean. A tomato nose and long, spindly fingers twisting the edge of a filthy toga finished the ensemble. Harry gaped as the elf addressed him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Master's Guest sir, but Master is wanting yous in the library. Master is telling Binky to tell young master's guest to dress

and hurry. Master does not like lateness.” The house elf, Binky by name, bobbed a series of frantic curtsies before straightening, watching Harry with wide eyes. “Binky is to wait for Master’s guest to dress and take him to Master, sir.” Harry somehow managed to wrestle his jaw off of the floor and watched Binky for a minute before nodding and turning back to the closet. *Time to make an impression.*

Harry chose a simple white dress shirt and burgundy vest which cut off at the shoulders adorned in gold buttons, and casual black slacks and a black cloak with a silver and gold gilded clasp and dragon hide boots to wear before turning and following Binky out of the room and down a series of dark corridors. *I have to hand it to the guy*, Harry thought with amusement as he watched Binky sneaking glances at him out of the corner of her eyes. *Whoever this guy is, he certainly has good taste in clothing.*

Harry twisted his upper body in all directions, trying madly to memorize the way to the library so he could retreat to ‘his’ room without getting lost, but it was impossible. Every corridor seemed identical and they took an incredibly complicated amount of twists and turns that made Harry’s head spin. It seemed to him that whoever owned this place didn’t want him to be able to move about without needing assistance, and therefore surveillance. *Clever.*

At long last they came to a stop in front of a set of double doors, almost as high as the ceiling and polished to such an amount that the dark mahogany shined in the darkness of the halls. There were no windows around. Harry turned to Binky only to find her gone. It seemed that this was to be a private audience. Harry swallowed hard as a sense of foreboding crept over him. He reached for the handle of the door and turned it slowly.

The first thing Harry noticed when he entered the library was the sheer number of books that lined the walls. Made of the same wood as the doors, the bookshelves seemed to glow with a life of their own as the titles of the books were proudly displayed in the gleaming light given by the fire dancing in the grate of the fireplace nearby. Weathered scrolls and battered, faded tomes were packed into every corner of the shelves, ranging from such subjects as healing herbs to dark rituals. Harry gaped at it all. He surely thought that this man

must be very well learned, and he felt a respect for a man he hadn't even met yet jump up a few notches. Someone with this many books must have an avid interest in magic.

Another thing he noticed besides the books and fireplace were the windows. Big, arcing windows just as he had seen in 'his' room spanned the walls at regular intervals; some of them were opened and the black curtains fluttered in the slight breeze, a cooling air seeping in and cooling Harry down, and causing the candles lit around the room to flicker eerily. The next and last thing he noticed was the desk. Placed in the middle of the room, it was fairly large in size and made of a wood Harry didn't recognize. The linings were done in black marble and stacked atop it were piles of carefully organized parchments and elegant eagle feather quills. There were several empty bottles of ink sitting next to a paper half-written, as if the writer had been in the middle of it and had been called away by something more important, and left forgotten in the process. Harry stepped further into the room and, after ascertaining it was empty, approached the desk cautiously. Harry struggled to read the spidery script darting across the parchment but soon gave it up as a bad job. He had always had difficulty reading cursive, anyways. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise suddenly as though he was being watched, and he whirled around to catch a glimpse of his stalker.

No one was there. The library was completely empty except for him. Harry frowned. Something still felt wrong. The air stirred around him, and he waited for one uneasy moment before dismissing it as the wind curling in from the windows. He turned back to the desk to continue studying the writing, but had barely looked at the parchment before spinning around again, eyes wide. He was certain there had been something there that time. He glanced uneasily from side to side, determined not to let whatever it was sneak up on him. He had barely finished this thought before he felt a cold, spidery hand on his shoulder. Harry jumped out of his skin and spun around with such speed that it made him dizzy to find his pursuer. Harry felt his stomach drop to his feet.

Clothed from head to toe in regal black, the man before him was tall, incredibly so. So pale as to be considered white, his fingers curled around the handle of a sleek, deadly looking ebony wand twirled

carelessly between his fingers. Black hair, as dark as his own, fell neatly into a face that could have been considered human if it hadn't been for his eyes. Those eyes...red as blood and sharp like a cat's, they seemed to glow in the murky light as they stared down at him with an inscrutable expression. Harry swallowed before managing a faint sound.

"Lord Voldemort."

Harry's mind struggled to keep up with what his eyes were seeing. *Lord Voldemort*, he thought incredulously. *Lord Voldemort was the one who rescued me from freezing to death.* The thought would have made him want to laugh if the situation weren't so serious. *Holy crap. I owe a life debt to the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord, of all people! Just ship me off the Azkaban right now, why don't you?* Harry reluctantly knew it to be true. He did, indeed, now owe a life debt to the wizard in front of him. He had little doubt that, if he had not been picked up out of the snow, he would have died of hypothermia. Harry mentally kicked himself for his stupidity. *Now look at the right mess you've gotten yourself into, you fool!* Harry realized with a jolt that Voldemort was looking at him with something akin to amusement, and found his emotions playing across his face. He quickly schooled his face into the impassive expression he had perfected for when people came over to visit at Potter Manor. He felt rather smug when the amusement dropped from the wizard's face but this was quickly replaced with anxiety as Voldemort's expression turned calculating. As he turned around and paced to an armchair that Harry hadn't noticed was standing near the fireplace he fervently prayed that the Dark Lord did not ask why he had been out in that weather. He had to come up with a plan to get out of here as soon as possible. Better neglected than dead. But before he had any chance of formulating an escape plan, Voldemort had flicked his wand and conjured another armchair across from him and motioned for Harry to sit down. He slowly approached the chair and lowered himself into it, watching the Dark Lord closely for any signs that he should start running all the while. Voldemort regarded him coolly for a moment.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked suddenly, closely watching Harry's expression. Harry was shocked. *Tea? I'm his prisoner and he offers me tea* He thought incredulously. But before he realized it he

had found himself nodding and Voldemort watching him appraisingly. "Very good." And with a snap of his fingers Binky appeared, silver platter fully laden with everything required for tea. She placed it on a nearby table and, sending Harry one frightened glance, disappeared. Voldemort summoned the tea to him and handed Harry a cup. He reluctantly took some and looked at it dubiously. Inspecting it closely and sniffing it, he dubbed it safe to drink and took a cautious sip. Harry noticed Voldemort watching him intently, tea untouched. Harry set his cup down and shifted nervously. He wondered what was to happen now. He felt that very little could surprise him at the moment.

"I'm glad to see you've suffered no ill effects from your little...escapade last night." Voldemort said, practiced casualness infused with every word. It put Harry on edge. "But I must ask what you were doing out there in the first place. It is not everyday that such a small child is able to make it past the wards that protect this place." Harry choked. *There were wards around this place? Why didn't I notice? And that means...crap.* Harry carefully considered what he was going to say. He felt, for some odd reason, compelled to tell the truth. After all, what would it hurt? It's not like he was important anyway. Decision made, he turned to the Dark Lord everything. That ever since his brother was born, he had been ignored. That he was sometimes forced to perform chores alongside the house elves because he was considered to be no better than them. His parents forgetting his birthday. The birthday cake, and everything he could remember about that day. Voldemort listened intently, never once interrupting. Harry was certain he should feel some amount of discomfort, but for some reason he could not fathom he felt perfectly at ease spilling all of his concerns to the Dark Lord. It was good to get it all out, even if it was being said to the wrong person. Once he was finished Harry breathed in deeply to catch his breath and deliberated over his tea again. Voldemort leaned against the back of his chair, considering. Finally, he caught Harry's attention and dragged it away from his teacup.

"So you're a Potter?" Harry nodded and Voldemort thought. *Surely it couldn't be that bad.* The boy was young, still easily influenced and, if what the boy had said was anything to go by, he wouldn't be keen to go back to them. Yes, he thought, suppressing an evil chuckle. *This could work out nicely.* Harry was watching Voldemort closely. He

seemed to be in deep thought. Harry felt no urge to drag him out of it. Voldemort looked up at him again, gaze coldly calculating. Harry didn't like that look.

"So, Mr. Potter. I have a question. A simple one, really. Has your brother ever come near this forest?" he watched the boy intensely as he mulled over the question. Taking a sip of his tea, Harry shook his head.

"Chris was always too scared to come near here. That's why I spend time in the forest. Mum and Dad would never go looking for him there if he ever got lost. I can get time to myself." Voldemort leaned back against his chair again, eyes distant in thought.

Obviously, the wards worked on the boy's brother. If the brother was truly the Chosen One, it would not have affected him. And yet...this boy walks in and explores at his leisure. He has not yet been attacked nor does he feel ill at ease there. I wonder...Is it possible? Perhaps the old fool got the wrong Potter child. He suppressed another bout of insane laughter. Oh, that would be so ultimately sweet, if Voldemort swayed the child to his side and he turned out to be the Chosen One. Then no one would be able to stop him! He smiled at the thought. Yes. He knew exactly what he had to do.

Harry didn't like the sight of that smile. It sent warning prickles down his back. The Dark Lord was obviously plotting something sinister. But what he said next completely threw him off.

"If you wish it, Harry, you may stay here. It is obvious to me that the truly powerful one in your family is you, not this Chris of yours. Here, I can teach you how to wield your powers. I already know you speak Parseltongue. Think of it," he continued, seeing the doubting look on the boy's face, "the fools' reactions when they find how truly powerful you are! You can make them regret ignoring you. Make them regret never spending time with you, or teaching you themselves!" Harry was slightly frightened by the mad gleam in the eyes of the man in front of him, but he considered the offer. Voldemort had already given him more attention than his family had in the last four years. What could it hurt? It's not like they missed him, anyways. And he could make them pay. This thought appealed to Harry in a way he did not

understand. The want was fueled by a bitterness so deep he could hardly describe it. Harry got a sudden flashback.

Flashback

His 'family' was gathered around the kitchen table, silly hats perched on their heads as Lily lowered a towering chocolate (Harry and Chris's favorite flavour) cake onto the table as their singing grew louder.

"Happy Birthday, dear Chris,

Happy Birthday to you..."

End Flashback

They didn't want him, nor did they need him. Resentment rose in Harry like an enraged snake. Fine, then. He didn't need them, anyways. He would make his own name for himself. But he would need help getting there. He turned back to the patiently waiting Dark Lord, decision made.

"I'll do it." Voldemort, who had been watching the emotions flash across Harry's face, smiled thinly and extended his hand, which Harry took and shook firmly. He smiled again, this time a twisted, triumphant smile.

"Excellent...Excellent."

Chapter Three: Missing?

Shadows flickered on the walls in a dizzy pattern. Warmth seeped from the hearth, silver gates clamped shut tightly to keep the flames in. The faded light from the fire extended just barely to the large, winged windows and there, in the line between darkness and light, a young boy leaned against the wall. Emerald eyes gazed, unseeing, across the vast expanse of the lawn below and before him. The forest at the edge of the property lay dark and uninviting to all, all except the boy. He had spent many a night in his old life seeking refuge beneath those very trees. Snow obscured his vision, blurring the outlines of everything outside.

Harry shook his head, black locks of hair swinging in front of his eyes before he returned his watch to the forest. Sadness crept into his eyes as thoughts slid, unbidden, into his head.

Do they even miss me? He thought wistfully. *Do they even realize I'm gone? Probably not.* His mind added viciously. *All they care about is Chris. Their "Prophecy Child". They don't care about me at all.* He looked back out over the dense forest in the distance and concentrated, but no matter how hard he looked all there was was wood. He couldn't see the Potter Manor at all. *I couldn't have run that far. So how'd I get here?* He sighed in frustration. He had a feeling, though, that he would find out very soon. He felt it in his very core.

Later, Harry walked down the corridors that seemed to make up the majority of the keep. He had, at first, needed Binky to show him around, but had eventually managed to be able to traverse the length between the kitchen, library, and his room without aid. He was now walking from the library back to his base; arms laden with many books he had found that seemed to be rather interesting. Unfortunately, the stack of books was quite large in his small arms, and so couldn't see where he was going. He also didn't see the large, poisonous snake that was Nagini until it was too late.

"Ouch! Ssssstupid little human! How dare you sssstep on my tail? I ssssshould bite you and end your misssserable exissstence right

now! I..." the enraged snake stopped short as she saw just who it was that had stepped on her tail; Harry looked back at her, wide eyed in surprise and slightly fearful. Nagini, however, seemed to forget her threats of just a few moments ago as her scaly visage lit up in what could only be excitement. *"It issss the ssssspeaker! The sssssspeaker Masssssster brought home! How ssssssimply delightful!"* Harry slowly processed this in his head. This snake—a snake that could easily wind itself around him at least five times and crush him into dust—was talking to him. Harry suppressed a shiver. He supposed this was the Dark Lord's feared familiar—Nagini was her name, he recalled, and he had always heard Aurors who came to talk to James tell horrifying stories of how she killed—none of which Harry wished to experience. He shook himself out of his shock just in time to hear her next words. *"I mussssst apologize, young sssssspeaker...I wasssss ssssssuppossssed to ssssstay with you until you awoke, but ssssssome urgent busssssinesssss came up and Masssssster had to sssssend me away on an errand...Yesssss...very urgent..."* Nagini trailed off, deeply in thought as Harry just stood there, goggling at her.

Voldemort assigned his pet snake as my keeper He thought incredulously. *Okay, nothing can possibly surprise me now.* Harry noticed that Nagini still seemed to be deep in thought, so he slowly began to edge around her huge, powerful body-- *could crush me in seconds* Harry thought, unable to stop himself—and just as he was beginning to think he would get away from the odd creature, he heard her call after him.

"Wait, young sssssspeaker! I wissssh to ssssspeak with you!" Harry suppressed a groan. He knew this would not end well.

As Nagini slithered out of his room a few hours later (they had retreated there in order to "talk" or rather, hiss at each other) Harry reviewed on his earlier assumption and decided he had been wrong. Once he got past the fact that you were talking to a man killing snake who happened to belong to the most feared Dark Lord in a century, he began to see that she was a rather intelligent creature; he was certain she could probably run rings around the majority of the people Harry himself had met, if they could understand her.

I'm certain Voldemort appreciates her company, he thought to himself, smiling slightly. Yes, if anything Nagini had said to him was true (and he didn't think she had any reason to lie) the vast majority of the Dark Lord's minions were rather stupid creatures. All bark and no bite, as he had heard Lily say—he didn't refer to the Potters as his family anymore. The only one in that family deserving of his attention now was Chris, and even that was stretching it. He was certain, however, that given time he himself would find a rather good friend in Nagini. His thoughts were interrupted by Binky popping into the room, carrying a tray bearing sandwiches and fruits. Harry couldn't help but smile as she set down the tray and disappeared with another *pop*. Nagini had taken one look at him earlier and promptly demanded that he order a fit lunch for himself immediately—which meant, of course, he order what she told him would be best for him to get his strength back. *"After all, you will need it for when Massster decides to sssstart training you."* She was like a mother hen, he mused. With her around he didn't think he would have any need for a mother; she was already a much better one than Lily had been, which, to Harry, was a scary thought.

"Lily! Chris! I'm home!" James Potter called out cheerfully as he came gliding out of the fireplace in a haze of ash in the brightly lit entrance hall of Potter Manor. He smiled as a small, red-haired child flew out of the door leading to the main parlor and crashed into him, giggling with delight. He laughed as his son's antics and promptly began to tickle him mercilessly, promoting screams of laughter from the small boy. His mother followed him more slowly out of the doorway, trying her hardest to frown in disapproval at them, but finally gave it up and joined them in laughing as they retreated back to the parlor to prepare for the party. Although Chris's birthday had been the day prior, they (the Order and the Potters) had all decided to hold a separate birthday party today so that the family could spend time together, but still hold a public party. Sirius had complained loudly "You already spend every living minute you can with them, James! You're killing yourself!" but it had been decided.

The guests had begun to arrive an hour or so ago; bright streamers were hung everywhere and clashed horribly with the coloring of the room, but no one cared. They were all too busy laughing and having

a good time. The cake had been consumed and small talk made by the time for presents to be opened rolled around. As everyone sat down to watch Chris rip into his gifts, Albus seemed to remember something. He looked around the room closely, frowning as he did so. James noticed.

“What’s wrong, Albus? Someone missing?” he asked, drawing the attention of the room. Chris looked up momentarily from the mountain before him and looked to the aged Headmaster in curiosity. He wasn’t the only one.

Albus was frowning again. “Yes,” he said at length. He looked at the Potters directly, concern flickering in his eyes. “Harry isn’t here. Have you seen him at all today?” Lily and James’s eyes widened, and they glanced at each other before casting their eyes to the door leading to the entrance hall where the staircase to the upper floors was. They had not even paid Harry a single thought. Lily looked back at Albus and shrugged.

“We haven’t seen him all day. So?” Albus frowned again, but this time he wasn’t the only one. Remus looked over at the couple oddly, a slight twitch to his lips the only sign of his annoyance. He knew Albus would take care of it.

“My dear Lily, if I remember correctly, isn’t it young Harry’s birthday today as well?” Many in the room shifted uneasily, realizing they had not brought a gift for the other child of the house. James and Lily, however, seemed not to be concerned by this at all.

“He’s probably up in his room, moping around again. Patty?” Lily called and a short, stubby nosed house elf appeared and curtsied. “Go find Harry and bring him down here. He should know better than to miss his brother’s birthday.” She added darkly as the house elf disappeared to fulfill her task. Remus frowned at her again as well as Albus, who was full out scowling now. Sirius, however, was oblivious as he always was and was busy helping Chris to unwrap his gifts, toying with them and laughing at the child’s expression when he charmed a new plush lion to roar and dance around the room. A few more semi-quiet minutes passes before Patty appeared again, this time wringing her hands, her eyes darting around the room nervously.

Everyone looked at her questioningly and she ducked her head, ashamed at her failure.

"I could not find him, Mrs. Potter ma'am," Patty said, wincing as she did so. "Young Master Harry is not in the house, and Patty had Bingy check outside but he is nowhere to be found, Mrs. Lily Potter, ma'am." Silence reigned as James dismissed her, shrugging as he did so. He didn't care if Harry was missing or not. All he cared was that the brat was ruining his son's birthday. Remus, however, was not so easily assuaged. He excused himself and left the room, proceeding to check all the places he figured Harry might be hiding. By the time the presents had finally been opened, Remus had returned, looking worried. Albus asked him the whereabouts of the missing boy, and he simply shook his head.

Soon a full out search had been launched by the two men, a sweep of the lawn, house, and surrounding area by all Order members present; all the while the Potters stood to the side, uncaring, simply watching in adoration as Chris played with his new toys.

By the end of the day, Harry James Potter was proclaimed missing all over Britain.

Chapter Four: Mutual Respect

Light streamed through the parted heavy black curtains that adorned the windows in the room. The curtains swayed in the slight breeze that shifted into the room, causing Harry's eyes to flutter slightly before slowly cracking open.

Harry stretched his hands groggily over his head as he sleepily surveyed his surroundings. Over the past few days he had become accustomed to seeing the dark colors of his new room instead of the traditional Gryffindor colors he had lived around his whole life, so he felt no surprise at the view that greeted him. Swinging his feet over the side of the bed, he hopped down and stumbled into his closet, grabbing whatever he touched first before going to the bathroom. Thirty minutes later he came out of the bathroom, far more awake than he was going in, and dressed in a simple pair of black slacks and a white button-down shirt. Harry tugged on a pair of dragon hide boots before exiting his room and heading down to the library.

The previous evening Nagini had come to once again speak to Harry. It was quickly becoming a nightly ritual and Harry found that he was truly enjoying her company. Nagini had informed him that he was to meet Voldemort in the library for a quick "bite to eat"—Though Harry didn't really like the way she said it—before being tested. Being tested on what, Nagini did not know, but Harry had a feeling he wouldn't be getting out of it unscathed.

If Harry was surprised to find the doors to the library wide open, he did not show it. Instead he walked carefully into the room, fully expecting something to jump out at him from around one of the tall, intimidating bookshelves that lined the walls of the room. When he had made it all the way to the desk without being ambushed, Harry started to relax before a *pop* sound to his side made him jump and whirl around. He just caught a glimpse of a house elf disappearing before he noticed the tray sitting on a table near the armchairs laden with fruits and light pastries. Harry approached it cautiously. He wouldn't put it past the Dark Lord to have the food jinxed as a part of the test he was supposed to be taking part in today. He slowly reached out a hand and picked out an apple from amid the pile of fruits on the tray and held it up to his face to inspect it. He whirled

around at that moment, eying the almost completely wide open space (save for a few bookcases) that had been behind him. He could've sworn he had heard something...

Harry scolded himself for his jumpiness. The library was empty save for him; he knew that.

He suddenly had the oddest feeling of déjà vu and was consequently reminded of his first visit to the library. Harry scanned the room, trying to see if there was any slight discoloration that might indicate that that was where his stalker (no doubt the Dark Lord, he thought to himself) was hiding, but there wasn't anything there. He turned back to the tray slowly, making sure that nothing snuck up on him while doing so. He bit into the apple and scolded himself yet again when he felt surprised that it genuinely tasted like a normal apple. There seemed to be nothing wrong with it, to Harry's confusion.

The Dark Lord watched him from his spot behind a nearby bookshelf. He had felt rather apprehensive when the boy had caught on to his little game, but had quickly come to the conclusion that young Mr. Potter did not know where he was when he gave no indication of seeing him. A deranged smile twisted his face as he intently watched Harry bite into the apple.

Appearances can be deceiving, child. He thought gleefully. Oh yes. This would be fun.

Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and he turned quickly around to find his watcher, only to look into a pair of blood red eyes gleaming madly at him from their position behind a nearby bookshelf. Harry cursed mentally at his lack of attention and barely had time to register the fact that a yew wand was pointed at him, ready to fire at a moment's notice. Harry tried to move away from the immediate range of fire, but found that his feet were stuck to the floor; thick, shiny red tendrils had somehow sprouted from his legs and anchored him there. He swore mentally again.

I never should have trusted that apple! He had barely finished this thought when a jet of red light shot at him. Harry, knowing there was

no way to dodge, simply closed his eyes and flung his arms up in front of his face protectively. *Get me out of here get me out of here get me out of here...* It was then that Harry experienced a peculiar feeling. It started at his core and spread out, cool fingers of something he could not identify sifting through his being. He felt like he was being shoved through a tube that was far too small for someone even his size. The feeling of being compressed was quickly closing in on Harry, bringing back one of his more unpleasant memories of his stay at Potter Manor. His memory of the first time his family had ever abused him.

Flashback

"No, no! I'm sorry! I'll never ask again!" sobbed a three-year-old Harry as his father dragged him unceremoniously through the brightly lit halls of the Manor. The brightness certainly did not match the mood as James Potter flung open the door to the dungeons and dragged him even more persistently down the dank, hard and uneven stairs to the cells that were kept below; they were hardly ever used anymore, but they were certainly going to be used now. James sneered at him as he threw the young child into the smallest and rattiest of the cells.

"That should teach you to think you could ever be better than Chris. You're just an ungrateful brat, a burden upon my wonderful family. You should be thankful we kept you when we could have just chucked you into an orphanage. Now you're going to stay down here until you admit that you'll never be anywhere as good as your brother. We don't want you tainting him with your twisted ideals." James turned to leave, but Harry threw himself at his legs, clinging to him for dear life while wailing brokenly.

"No! Daddy, no! Please don't do this, please! No!" he sobbed even harder as James kicked him away and slammed the door shut, the resounding sound of metal smacking into stone ringing in Harry's ears as he gave one last desperate scream. "NO! Daddy! NO! Please! Mum! Anyone...Please!" he cried pitifully as he hoped for someone to come through that door, to sweep him up and tell him that everything would be okay. But his father did not appear, nor anyone else.

Thus began the most miserable chapter in Harry's life.

End Flashback

Harry couldn't breathe. It was far too much like the dungeon cell that had become his unwilling second bedroom. Emotions filled him; anger, despair, and a childish plead to be let out. Harry couldn't handle it, and he let it be known.

"NO!" he screamed. Raw power filled him, and he felt the compressed feeling being ripped apart until all he felt around him was nothingness. He kept his arms up over his face, waiting for the spell that might end his short, albeit miserable existence.

But the impact did not come. Harry slowly creaked open an eye, then outright goggled at the scene before him.

The once immaculate library lay in ruins; books were scattered across the room, some unharmed, but yet others with scorched pages or ripped-off covers. The bookcases were knocked over, having fallen in dizzying array across the room as if they had been picked up and thrown. All the glass in the windows had shattered into dust and the once beautiful curtains lay in tatters on the floor. Voldemort's desk was overturned with all its carefully stacked and organized papers scattered into the corners of the room, and in the middle of the mess was Voldemort himself, standing up carefully from his spot on the floor and nonchalantly dusting imaginary dirt from his robes. Harry gulped nervously. He had a feeling that whatever had happened in here, he was certainly in trouble. Voldemort looked him in the eyes and Harry was both curious and weary about what shone in them. A dark approval radiated from him, and he had a feeling that the Dark Lord was pleased.

"Well, Mr. Potter," Voldemort said casually after a few moments of tense silence. "You have passed your test, and with flying colors, may I add." Harry stared at him, flabbergasted.

"What?" Harry was confused. What test? There hadn't been a test. Voldemort looked at him, amused, before lazily motioning with one hand the destruction around them.

"This, young Mr. Potter, is all your doing. I congratulate you. I did not expect you to react so spectacularly to my attack. Well done." Harry was still confused, but now he was concerned, too. Looking around the ruined library he wondered. *He* did all this? It didn't seem possible. He looked to the wizard across from him for an explanation. Voldemort flicked his wand slightly and two armchairs popped into existence to replace the old ones. He sat down comfortably and motioned for Harry to do the same. Harry did so as he began his explanation.

"When I first agreed to teach you, Mr. Potter, I admit I had no clear idea of how to accomplish this. Oh, there were several ways," he waved off Harry's curious look, "but I wished to use one that would leave you intact and generally unharmed. What I did do was this. I made sure that my dear Nagini informed you that you would be eating here, thus making it so that you did not suspect the food that appeared on the table." He smiled at Harry darkly before continuing. "Using a simple sticking charm in combination with a low level Transfiguration spell I made it so that the...paste...the apple created was to hold you in place; now understand this, if you had truly wished to get out of it, it should have been fairly easy if you are anywhere near the power level I believe you to be. However, what you did do came as a surprise, I admit, though a rather pleasant surprise." He yet again motioned to the wreck around them as if he was merely commenting on the weather. "You see, Mr. Potter, not only did you throw off the apple's affects, but you somehow apparated yourself out of range of my stunner and blasted the room away." Harry expected him to be angry about that, but instead found that the Dark Lord was far from it. "I was not expecting it, but it does help me to understand where you stand power-wise." He held up a hand to stem Harry's questions and gave him a once over. "You look rather exhausted. Go back to your room and rest for now; Binky will wake you for your dinner. Your training begins tomorrow." He smiled slightly as Harry slid off of his chair and made his way around the debris to the door. He managed to catch Voldemort's last sentence before he made his way to his room.

"Get some sleep, Harry. You will need it." Harry was already collapsed on his bed before he realized that Voldemort had called him by his first name.

Chris smiled and giggled as his Uncle Padfoot made the plush lion dance around the room again, much as he had done back at the birthday party. He clapped his small pudgy hands and managed a gurgled cheer as Sirius grinned cheekily and lifted him up into his arms. Sirius looked him square in the eye, a mischievous glint in them.

“So sport, wanna go prank Jamesie while he’s still preoccupied with filing all that boring paperwork for the Ministry?” Upon receiving an evil grin from the young child he laughed heartily. “A prank is it then.” He left the room with a matching evil grin on his face, carrying young Chris in his arms.

Albus Dumbledore gazed blankly out of the windows of his office, watching idly as light streamed into the room. With a sigh he turned his tired eyes back to the acceptance letters that lay before him for the new students that were to attend Hogwarts this year. Traditionally, that would be Minerva’s job as the Deputy Headmistress, but she had some urgent family business to attend to which left him to do it himself. Not that he would have minded, really, but today his mind kept straying to one of the Order’s newest, although not most important, problem. Young Harry Potter had gone missing just around a week ago, and they had yet to find neither hide nor hair of him, or any evidence of where he had gone. Albus pushed up his half-moon spectacles and rubbed his eyes wearily. He didn’t even know if the child was kidnapped or if he had run away, though the latter seemed more likely, given the circumstances.

Albus frowned when he thought of the Potters’ behavior towards the discovery of their missing son. They didn’t seem to care at all which, as compared to the Lily and James he knew, was completely unordinary. He had already decided to look into it...once he finished these papers. He sighed again and smiled slightly when he heard a questioning chirp from the phoenix sitting regally on his perch in the corner.

“Yes, Fawkes, I know. Worrying over it will get me nowhere.” He turned back to his work, thoughts of the mystery of Harry Potter’s

disappearance hovering at the back of his mind, but certainly not forgotten.

Lily sat listening to the other Healers in St. Mungo's prattle on about the latest bit of gossip from *Witch Weekly* and let her mind wander for awhile. It had been a week since her baby boy's birthday and she felt certain that it could have gone better. The reason for all the mayhem that day came back to her and she scowled slightly. Her eldest son had gone missing that day, which caused her to look back at all the times she had never noticed he was there. He had an impeccable talent for fading into the background.

Lily had not wanted to have to neglect her eldest son in the beginning, but quickly adjusted to it. After all, Chris was the one who needed all her love and attention; Harry wasn't nearly as important as the Prophesied Child, and so she had ignored him. Despite her conscious saying that what she did was wrong, she stood firm by her beliefs. Harry was of no consequence and, although she had cared for him in the beginning, she could no longer bring herself to care about what happened to her eldest child. She had stopped caring years ago. Lily tuned herself back into the conversation just as it turned to Chris. Her fellow Healers began exclaiming how cute he was and that he was certainly going to be a dashing young man when he was older. Smiling, Lily happily joined in, completely forgetting any and every thought she had had about Harry in light of her baby boy.

Chapter Five: A Mentor and his Protégée

Harry awoke bright and early the next morning to gleaming sunlight streaming into his room through open curtains and a full tray of food placed neatly on his bedside table. It was obvious Binky had been here, Harry mused, as he devoured the raspberry pastries and green grapes that the house-elf had so thoughtfully brought him, as she had for the past few days. After a quick shower and dressing, Harry wondered back over to the tray where he located the note he had spotted before. It wasn't until he scanned the parchment with shining red ink did he realize his training was to begin today. He gulped heavily and read the note more thoroughly.

Mr. Potter,

As you are no doubt aware, your training is to begin today. I shall have Binky show you to the training arena after you have finished your meal, and I expect you to be there at eight. Do not be late.

P.S. And I suggest you wear suitable clothing.

Harry stared down at the note, bewildered. *Suitable clothing?* He looked down at the slacks and dress shirt he was wearing before sighing and entering the closet once more to change. He came back out, now wearing dark gray sweatpants and a simple white shirt before strapping on a pair of slippers. He didn't want his dragon hide boots to be ruined (if the note was any indication of what awaited him) as he was growing quite attached to them. A knock at the door let him know that Binky was waiting for him out in the hall. He took one last glance around the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything before opening the door and following Binky's anxious form down the hall; a place where Harry could have sworn had not been there the previous night.

Down twisted hallways Harry followed her. Flaming torches lit the walls at regular intervals, bouncing off the dark stone walls and intimidating suits of armor that Harry had not seen in the keep previously. Here and there were paintings of places and events Harry could not identify, and an occasional gleaming black steel door would peek out of the walls, almost perfectly camouflaged. Harry stared

around in wonder, before almost tripping as Binky led him down a flight of stairs that seemed to have come out of nowhere. He suppressed violent memories of the dungeons underneath Potter Manor and followed her blindly down the stairs only to be engulfed in darkness. Jumping at the sudden lack of light, Harry flicked a panicked glance behind him to see the entrance to the stairwell bathed in shadow, completely hidden from his view. He shivered in the cool air and turned back to Binky's nervous, retreating back. It seemed she liked it down here no more than he did.

The further they descended the colder and wetter it seemed to Harry. Icy liquid that had managed to find its way onto the stairs seeped up through his slippers and to his feet, chilling him. The darkness pressed down around them from all sides, and Harry wished fervently for the passageway to end. Almost as if it had heard his wish, the dark passageway suddenly ended at a door similar to those he had seen upstairs and he could make out light shifting through the crack between the steel and the floor. Harry looked around and found that Binky was gone. Not wanting to be in the dark alone, he gratefully threw open the door and stepped inside.

The first thing that greeted Harry was the light. Compared to the hall he had just left, it felt to Harry as if he had a thousand lights shined into his eyes at once. Hissing in pain, he flinched back and hurriedly closed his eyes. He waited a few moments and, when he felt it safe to open them again, cautiously cracked them open and gaped at his surroundings.

He had seen pictures of old gladiator coliseums in the history books he had managed to nick from the library back in Potter Manor, but that was nothing compared to what he saw here. With an ornately decorated vaulted ceiling at least sixty feet high and polished columns gleaming at the very edges of the room he felt as if he had just walked right into ancient Rome. Bookshelves, too, lined the walls in wide arcs, fit to burst with tomes Harry could only assume had something to do with combat and defense strategies. He pressed his hand into the nearest wall and felt to his amazement that it was padded with a soft material he could not identify. In the farthest reaches of the circular room was a pale cream armchair resting and ready for use in front of an oak desk, fully equipped with a variety of

candles, quills, inks, and stacks of parchment. The desk and chair puzzled Harry as to their use but he put it off for the moment and continued to examine the room. Weapons of all kinds hung above the bookcases, and another full rack of them lay next to the desk and chair. Sunlight streamed in from windows so high up that he could not properly see them, and he wondered at how they got it down here when they were in the dungeons, yet make it feel and look so real. Harry was too busy goggling at the contents of the room to hear the soft, amused chuckle that echoed from right behind him.

“Pleased by what you see, Mr. Potter? You’d do well to be. You will be spending a lot of time in here.” It took a few moments for this to catch up to Harry, and when it did he spun around and looked up at the amused visage of the Dark Lord in surprise before realizing who it was he was staring at and turning his gaze to his feet. Voldemort just shook his head and strolled past him.

“Mr. Potter.” Harry looked up and moved to join Voldemort in the center of the magnificent room. “I believe explanations are in order. The room you now stand in is the training arena. Here is where you will be completing the majority of your practical learning, as well as some of your written work.” He gestured to the desk and chair with this last part, and suddenly their use became clear to Harry. They were there for him to use. “As well as practical and written work, I will be having you commit to physical training, but I am getting ahead of myself.” He flicked his wand and two armchairs appeared next to where they were standing. He took a seat before continuing. “I have already gauged your magical abilities, as I’m sure you remember--” Oh yeah, Harry thought sardonically as he seated himself, he remembered all right. “and to that measure I am going to teach you. Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to recount all your previous experiences with accidental magic?” Harry, however thrown by this sudden question, began to comb his brain. There were many times that he had performed accidental magic, it was true; he did it so much more often than Chris had done that Lily and James Potter had thrown him in the dungeon after every occurrence, hoping to cut down on his magical reserves through abuse so that he wouldn’t be thought of as better than his younger brother. There was one incident, however, that stood the most prominently in his mind. He began to recount the ordeal.

Flashback

Harry was feeling resentful. The four year old child sat glumly on the edge of his seat on the opposite side of the table from the rest of the Potters, picking at his food. He knew he should be feeling happy for himself; he was almost never allowed to attend dinner with others unless there was a dinner party held in “honor of his brother’s birthday” or some other event in which some people might notice he was missing. However, he felt solemn today because he knew that today was his birthday also, and practically no one remembered as such. There was one, however, who always remembered, but he was not here today due to the fact that that night was the night of a full moon. So Harry, with no real reason to celebrate, ignored the cheerful adults around him and stared unhappily down into his chicken breast and mashed potatoes.

Later was the time for the presents. Sitting in the darkest and furthest corner of the parlor where they normally held the parties, Harry watched as his brother ripped into present after present, some of which Harry would’ve killed to have (A Young Wizard’s Guide to Transfiguration, which Sirius gave to Chris in the hopes that he would be like his father “We need another Prongs around the house, your father just isn’t as fun anymore”) that Chris just threw away in disinterest after giving Sirius the customary grateful smile that made everyone think him an angel. Harry resisted the urge to snort. He could think of a hundred different ways to use that book that his brother just threw away as if it was rubbish. Instead, he just kept quiet and watched despairingly as his brother finished opening his last present and the other partygoers roused in a loud and rowdy “Happy Birthday” that he was sure would shatter the windows if they got any louder.

The party was finally over. It was late at night, and Chris was yawning sleepily in his mother’s arms while Sirius and James were shaking hands and exchanging jubilant goodbyes with one another. While they were finishing up their talk, Lily kissed James on the cheek, waved farewell to her husband’s best friend and ascended the flight of stairs to put Chris down for bed. Harry, silently stalking in the shadows (an ability he had picked up over the years) was about to

leave the room to go to bed himself when Sirius seemed to remember something.

Sirius, looking around as if to find the object of his search standing out in the open, he asked James, "Where's Harry? I just remembered that Moony wanted me to give this to him since he couldn't make it himself tonight." From inside a pocket of his outlandish black muggle leather jacket he extracted a small gift, wrapped in shiny paper and finished up with a blue ribbon. Harry's eyes widened from the shadows as James went red in the face, reaching for it.

"I'll give it to him, Padfoot, don't worry," he said through gritted teeth and Harry, dreading what was about to happen, stepped out hastily from the shadows and flew to Sirius's side. James glared at him through narrowed slits as Sirius turned to Harry, grinning mischievously.

"There's the little monster! Hey sport, how are you doing? I've got a present here from Moony for you." He suddenly looked sheepish. "I would've had a present for you, too, but I, uh, kinda forgot..." he blushed in embarrassment before presenting an ecstatic Harry the gift with a flourish of the hands. Harry, so happy that he couldn't speak, just nodded a "I forgive you" and carefully undid the wrappings of the present, with James watching from the sidelines angrily. Harry gasped as the last piece of paper fell away as revealed a book that Harry had wanted a long time. He had seen it in Flourish and Blotts the only time he had ever been brought there, which of course had been with Remus and Sirius as his escorts. A thick green leather bound tome, the book "1000 Ways to Defend Against Dark Curses" was a second hand book, but Harry didn't care. He hugged it to his chest, the happiest he had been in a long time now that he had evidence that at least someone still cared that it was his birthday. Sirius smiled down at him, before turning and saying a final goodbye to James. Ruffling Harry's already wild hair, he turned and left. Harry was too happy at the moment to notice the hailstorm that descended upon him until he felt his precious treasure ripped from his hands. Looking up in shock and horror, he quailed at the sight of James's blood red face and horribly angry eyes. Harry knew this would not turn out well. With Harry's book still in his possession, he grabbed Harry by the collar and hauled him back into the Entrance Hall where

the Flooing fireplace stood. Harry looked around wildly for support, but Sirius had already left. Dread and fear filled him. James stopped in front of the fireplace, only pausing long enough to light it. He gave the child he held in a vice grip a malicious look before shoving the book into Harry's face.

"Do you see it, you ungrateful brat? Take a good look, because this is the last time that you'll see it." Harry's eyes widened again as he realized what James had in mind, and reached for the book in panic, knowing he stood no chance. James pulled it back, sneering as Harry snatched at empty air, and tossed the birthday present into the flames. The fire licked at it before beginning to devour it hungrily, the flames rising ever higher with each page burnt. Smoke curled up and wafted into Harry's nose and eyes, causing him to sneeze, but he paid no attention. He flung himself at the fire in a desperate attempt to save his treasure, but James just held him back, watching in cruel pleasure as the book was destroyed.

Harry couldn't take it. Of all the things they had done to him that had probably been one of the worst. He was bitter, enraged. He wondered how they would like it if something of theirs was burned. Before he could stop himself or realize what he was doing, he began to imagine his family's prized curtains--the ones that hung up in the dining room and had been in the family for generations--- curling up into a towering pillar of fire, the golden tarps burning into ashes as the silky material was turned into a smoldering mess—He snapped out of it as he heard James's cry of panic, and turned in time to see the older man darting to the doors of the dining room, behind which smoke was seeping out in waves. Harry followed him swiftly, intent to see what had happened. He looked on in horror at what he saw.

The red and gold curtains that had been in the family since Henry Malfurion Potter of the year 1293 had first put them up were curling in the great pillars of flames that Harry had been imagining not moments ago. He watched in morbid fascination as James tried in vain to save the curtains, only to be rudely shaken from his trance by a pained sob from behind him. Lily, back from putting Chris to bed, rushed past him, crying harder than he had ever seen her cry as she joined her husband in trying to stop the flames. However, there was nothing to be done. As the last remnant of the scarlet curtains curled

up in a wisp of ash and smoke, Lily and James turned, furious, to the small boy that was just standing there. As Lily grabbed his arm viciously and dragged him down into the dungeons with which he became so familiar, Harry was hit with the true impact of what he had done.

It was the first time they had ever beaten him. It had started with Lily slapping him harshly across the face and James kicking him in the ribs, but it slowly progressed to outright violence. Harry lay there, bleeding profusely and hardly conscious as they closed the heavy metal doors of his prison shut with a bang.

From that day on, Harry swore never to let them best him again.

End Flashback

Harry, having finished his tale, went on to explain that since then, he tried his hardest not to get angry at anything they did to him, and how he had learned to sneak around even more silently and stealthily than he had before. He never let see him give into the pain, nor did he let him see him with anything of value that they could possibly destroy to spite him. Voldemort studied the boy intently as he ended his long monologue, causing Harry to shift uncomfortably and find obsessive interest in the pattern of the floor. Harry hadn't noticed it there before. Voldemort was quiet for a few moments before once again catching the young boy's attention.

"Can you emulate it?" Harry stared at him in confusion and he elaborated. "The fire. Do you believe that you could emulate the fire?" Harry considered this for a few moments before nodding his head slowly.

"I might," he said hesitantly, returning his gaze to the ground. "I'm not sure I could do it unless I was really angry, though." Voldemort nodded at this.

"Let's try to do so without anger. I do not desire this room, or my keep for that matter, burned to the ground." Harry blushed and wrung his hands sheepishly as Voldemort stood from his seat. Harry did the same and Voldemort banished the chairs to the edges of the room

with a flick of his wand. With another flick, a simple wooden pillar around three feet in height stood in their place. "I want you to focus on setting this pillar on fire." Harry nodded and as Voldemort moved out of range Harry stared at the wooden pillar, focusing intently. He summoned up the rage he had felt that night a little over a year ago but toned it down a bit, keeping in mind the Dark Lord's warning of burning the room down. Harry felt a small flicker of light and heat melt into existence somewhere around his core, and it spread out in much the same way it had when he had apparated back in the library. He felt his hands get warm, and sweat break out on his forehead.

This isn't working, he thought to himself. *I have to try something else. Perhaps more power?* Harry decided to try it. He focused again on the pillar, but this time he did not hold back any of the rage. He jumped high into the air as the wood erupted into flames, the fire hungrily licking at the floor as well. He panicked and hastily broke the focus he had on the pillar, and as he did so the flames died out as if it had been doused with water. He sighed in relief, the danger averted, and turned to glance guiltily at Voldemort. The Dark Lord in question was frowning slightly at the pile of ash.

"Just as I thought," he said. "Your emotions have a tight rein on your magic, and only extreme emotions can truly get a result." He paused and seemed to contemplate something before turning to Harry. "You will have to learn control of your mind and emotions, as it is vital to learning to control your magic." He summoned the armchairs back to them and they sat down once again. "Mr. Potter, have you ever heard of the art of Occlumency or Legilimency?" Harry shook his head. "I thought so. Occlumency, when practiced properly, will allow you to shield your mind from outside influence and invasion while at the same time helping you to order your thoughts and control your emotions, which tends to make memorizing spells and wand movements far easier." He gestured to himself. "I myself am both an Occlumens and a Legilimens. I only know of two others who are near my skill, and I hope to find that you will soon join that group as number three." He paused before continuing. "Legilimency is the ability to peruse another's mind—not mind reading, which is a rather inaccurate muggle term--- it also allows you to tell when others are lying, if you are skilled enough. I intend to teach you both of these." Harry nodded, fascinated.

“So I can learn to shield my mind?” Harry thought about this. It would be a useful technique, he was sure, as in all his time in the Potter library he had never come across a book on the subject, which to Harry meant it was a rare practice. “I’ll do it.” *As if there was any other choice*, he laughed to himself. It sounded like fun to him.

Voldemort spent the next half hour outlining the basics of Occlumency (“You would never manage Legilimency if you have not first mastered Occlumency”) before Voldemort decided that training for the day was over.

“You may leave now. I trust that you will be able to find your way back down here tomorrow morning, so be here by the same time and do not be late. Practice clearing your mind tonight.” He gave a twisted smile. “I will know if you don’t.” Now dismissed, Harry jumped off his chair and made for the door, but stopped just before he left and turned back, looking uncomfortable. Voldemort gave him a mildly curious look and Harry cleared his throat, looking at the floor.

“Err...I was wondering...What am I supposed to call you now? I mean, you’re teaching me so it would be Master, but I’m not a Death Eater, so I...” Harry fell silent, eyes firmly locked on his slippers. Voldemort looked at him, surprised.

It’s true, Voldemort couldn’t help but note thoughtfully. *I was not expecting this. What should he call me? Master does not seem appropriate although I am his teacher, and by no means is he to call me Voldemort, as that is disrespectful and I do not want him in the habit of disrespecting me...Dark Lord? No, same as Master. He isn’t a Death Eater, at least not yet...* He was truly stumped, and as he looked on the young boy near the door he gave the first name that came to his mind.

“Tom.” Harry looked up in surprise.

“What?”

If he was the type of person to show discomfort, Voldemort would have smacked himself. “Tom,” he said again, cursing himself for saying anything in the first place. “You may call me Tom.” Harry nodded then hesitated as he reached for the door again.

“Then I will see you tomorrow, erm, Tom...” and with that he left the room, feeling mildly uncomfortable with the informality of the Dark Lord’s new title for him, but he stopped as Volde—*Tom*, he reminded himself, called him back.

“But only in private, Mr. Potter,” he drawled lazily in an attempt to hide his lost composure. “Call me the Dark Lord in front of others. Understand?” Harry nodded and left the room hurriedly again, wondering when in the world he would be seeing other people.

Voldemort sat in his throne a few hours later, still mulling over the events of the day as his Death Eaters came up one by one to give their information. He had sent Nagini to keep Harry company in his room and to keep him from wandering the halls and meeting a stray Death Eater. He did not need anything to happen to his new protégée yet. He returned his attention back to his followers as Nott came up and kissed the hem of his robes before kneeling and speaking in a quivering voice. They were dreadfully boring. He was certain if it was not for Nagini and Harry he would have lost all patience with these imbeciles he had surrounded himself with a long time ago.

The reports were far shorter and not nearly as detailed as they had once been; ever since Voldemort had first found Harry and agreed to teach him he had cut back substantially on the raiding his followers were sent out to do. Now that his main problem was teaching the boy while at the same time as trying to conquer Europe, Voldemort had had to assign competent leaders to take his place at the front of the raids. He was sure that the fool Dumbledore and his sniveling dogs were happy for the reprieve. He quickly wiped the sneer off his face before his Death Eaters could see. He had bigger problems right now than the old man and his pet birds that were a constant pain to his plans. Nott finished his admittedly short report and hurried back to his spot in the circle as the next Death Eater came up to give his news. Voldemort fought back a sigh. It promised to be a terribly boring night tonight.

Severus sneered at Black and Potter across the kitchen table of Grimmauld Place. Albus had insisted that the Order headquarters be

in the mutt's ancestral home, something Severus was sure made the dog feel very happy and far more important than he was. He blew out a small huff of angry air as he settled back into his chair waiting for the meeting to begin. He had no idea why Albus had called it in the first place; nothing had truly happened concerning the war for at least a week, and so for Severus being there was a moot point, as he had nothing to report—something Potter and his pet inbreed gloated upon every time they saw him. His glare shifted from his two school tormentors to Lily and the child she was holding. She always insisted on bringing the boy to the meetings, something that irritated him to no end. In his opinion the boy was a spoiled brat and unworthy of the title “The Prophesized Child” that had been bestowed upon him. He couldn't help but wonder where the other Potter brat was, as he knew there were two of them. He was also certain that the elder was probably just as spoiled and rotten as his younger sibling, something that he had no doubt Potter had seen to. He sneered at them as Albus entered the room, only to be frowned at by the older wizard as he took his seat at the head of the table.

“This meeting of the Order of the Phoenix is now called to order.” His voice, though soft and well-spoken, seemed to boom over the boisterous talk of the rest of the room, quieting them immediately. Severus grudgingly admired this ability, something he only had with his students and the lower ranked Death Eaters.

The meeting went as it always did, rumors of Death Eater activity that proved to be a prank, small raids sprouting up here or there at small villages and towns with a low populace—it was times like these that made Severus wonder just how serious the Dark Lord was about conquering Europe, as it seemed to him that he was putting very little effort into it.

Of course, he would never say that aloud.

He snapped back to reality as Albus asked him to stand and give his report. Severus rolled his eyes discreetly as he did indeed stand up and begin his report. Albus truly did seem as senile as he was acclaimed to be, when Severus time and time again told him the same thing with no change in his speech. As he finished his report (“Few raids, no rumor of activity, Dark Lord strangely quiet” same old)

Severus noticed the sadly disappointed look Albus always wore when nothing varied concerning his news. It made Severus wonder just what the Headmaster was waiting to hear of. He honestly had no idea.

Chapter Six: In The Looking Glass

Harry glared down at the book laying open in front of him in frustration, hoping silently that it would just disappear in a haze of flames so that he would have a good excuse for not mastering Occlumency. When it stubbornly remained unburned, he let out a great whoosh of air and fell back against his bed, short arms tucked behind his head.

When Tom had told him to read this book and master the basics of the art before his next training session, he had no idea just how hard it would be. He knew now, though. Harry sighed once again and forced himself back into a sitting position before grabbing the book and resignedly reading the passage again; the same passage he had been trying to make sense of for the past hour.

“Occlumency is a very difficult art to master,” he read aloud, pausing for a moment to roll his eyes at the obvious statement before continuing on. *“Although many witches and wizards have grasped the basics, there are very few in the world that has an actual understanding, much less mastery, of the art. Currently, the most well-known Occlumens is Albus Dumbledore... Bet Tom didn’t like that, but what did he mean when he said two others? I wonder who the third is, because the second is obviously Dumbledore... The first step to mastering Occlumency is to be able to clear your mind.”* Harry flipped to the next page and read on. *“Rest your body somewhere comfortable in a good position for meditation, close your eyes and slow your breathing. Focus solely on wiping all active thought from your mind. If necessary, focus on something in the room instead of closing your eyes, and let nothing into your mind but that object.”*

Harry set the book aside and leaned back into the plush emerald pillows behind him, shutting his eyes and slowed his breathing. This part was the easy part for Harry; it was clearing his mind he found hard. No matter what, a thought would always pop up out of seemingly nowhere and push any serenity he had achieved aside, leaving Harry feeling more frustrated than he had before he had even started.

This time the intrusion was thoughts of Remus. Harry found himself, despite his best efforts to the contrary, wondering how the werewolf was doing now. Did he even notice that Harry was gone? Did anyone tell him? Would Remus be trying to find him? Harry shook his head, anger building up behind his closed eyelids. That was always what threw him off; Harry was certain he wouldn't be able to master this ability without at least knowing if his favorite "Uncle" missed him. Harry sighed heavily and slid onto the carpet. Might as well get some late dinner while he still could before tomorrow; he had a feeling it would be very, very rough.

Remus sat at the table in the kitchen of Sirius's home, looking down solemnly into a mug of coffee that didn't seem to appetizing at the moment. He had been missing in action for awhile due to his...condition...and because of it he had not been able to attend the Order Meeting that had been held the night before.

Ever since Harry had gone missing, Remus had been in a bad way. It took all of Sirius's persuasive abilities to get him to eat anything, much less participate in Order business. The werewolf had confined himself to his room on the third floor most of time, stoically refusing to look at anything that held a memory of the young boy he loved so much attached to it.

Sirius hadn't been doing to well, either. He had also been feeling the loss of Harry, though not as keenly as his friend was. He tried to push away that sentiment by spending more time with Chris, and it had helped to some extent; but every time he looked at Lily and James he was surprised and disappointed. Didn't they feel anything at the loss of their eldest son? Apparently not. Sirius knew that something was very wrong with this picture, but he let it be; even though he was concerned for Harry, it was none of his business, and Sirius was of the firm belief that Albus would somehow manage to bring the kid back to them. And it was with this in mind that Sirius stepped through the floo of the house after his shift at the Ministry and joined Remus at the table. The despairing man looked up from his mug, hope shining in his eyes fervently. Sirius didn't want to be the one to tell him, but he had no other choice in the matter.

“Sorry, Moony,” he said, and was saddened to see the light deflate and disappear from his friend’s eyes. “There’s no word of him at all, and Dumbledore’s been interrogating everyone in the meeting for any info. He’s even been jumping down Snape’s throat.” He seated himself at the table, suddenly glaring in disgust at the scuffed surface on which his arms were resting. “The greasy git. He probably knows exactly where Harry is, but is just too sick and twisted to tell us where he is. Probably thinks it’s friggin’ hilarious, the wanker.” Pausing, he looked up at Remus and smiled apologetically. “This probably isn’t making it any easier for you, Moony, just ignore me...but I have to let it out somehow...” Remus gave a faint smile back.

“It’s no problem, Padfoot, you’re just trying to help...” he sighed and looked back into his cup. The coffee was cold now, and the liquid looked murky and disturbed. Like his thoughts. “I just can’t stand it, though. I don’t even know where he is. He could be stumbling into one of Voldemort’s traps right now, and there’s nothing we can do about it!” He jumped up from his chair and started pacing frantically. “What are we supposed to do? There’s no way of knowing where he could be, no way of finding him, and no way to protect him if something *does* happen...” Sirius watched him as he walked the length of the kitchen back and forth, bothered by the change wrought in the man before him. Normally Remus was the calm and collected one, consoling him when he worked himself into a fit; now it seemed as if they had changed roles. To Sirius it was a daunting thought.

Remus slowly regained his composure and returned to his upturned chair, gazing back down into the mug that was still filled with cold coffee. He sighed and took it to the sink before getting a fresh drink. There was nothing to be done now, except wait. And for once, Remus hated to wait.

Harry entered the training arena the next day, feeling very nervous and edgy about what was coming. He had by no means mastered the basics of Occlumency, and he feared what would happen when Tom found out. He reached the center of the room, sat on the cushioned floor and began to wait.

It did not take long. Before five minutes had passed--- ones in which Harry jumped at the smallest noises from the outside, whether it was a rat or drop of water bouncing off the ground--- Tom had entered the room and smiled at Harry pleasantly. At least, Harry hoped it was a pleasant smile.

“Very good, I see that you are already here.” He smiled and a chair appeared five feet in front of Harry. Tom sat down and surveyed Harry over folded hands appraisingly. “Begin your meditation now. When I feel that you have reached an adequate spot in your mediation, I will begin the testing.” Harry, not wanting to look into those fierce red eyes, closed his eyes and slowed his breathing.

Harry found it harder than usual to clear his mind, though he had little doubt that it was probably the presence of the Dark Lord that did it. Harry focused on nothing, hoping it would clear his mind. He reached a shortly-lived minute of complete focus after a half hour of concentration before his most well-used thought topic sprung into his mind: Remus. Unfortunately, Tom had seen that split second and decided to begin his attack there.

What he found in the boy’s mind was not what he had been expecting. Instead of nothing at all (the results of a successful mind clearing) he found memories flashing by him at a rapid pace, accompanied by jumbled emotions and notions. Before Tom hastily beat a retreat from the chaos, he got one clear impression: the image of a sandy-haired man with kind amber eyes full of acceptance. He looked just in time to see Harry slump back onto the ground, panting heavily. He gazed at the boy hard, deliberating over what he had seen as he waited for the child to acknowledge his presence once again.

When Harry finally managed to sit up with his mind back into some semblance of order, he was met with a pair of flashing, irritated eyes. He gulped and quickly tried to lower his gaze, but found that he couldn’t.

“So, you did not see fit to practice last night,” Tom hissed. Harry flinched. This was not good. “I see. So, you believe that me teaching you to control your magic isn’t important enough to warrant an attempt to improve?” Harry opened his mouth to protest but was cut

off sharply. "*Silence.*" He quickly closed his mouth, his mind racing a mile per minute to find a way to get out of this situation. "I hope you have a good explanation as to why you didn't practice. Care to share one?" Pinned once again with those unforgiving crimson orbs, Harry scrambled for any prudent thought.

"I can't focus!" He blurted out as Tom began to raise his wand. The older man stopped and lifted an eyebrow. "I can't stop thinking about someone important to me..." Images of Remus once again flashed in his mind and he plowed recklessly on. "I can't do this until I know for a fact that he isn't depressed over my being gone or something!" Realizing that he had probably gone too far, he speedily shut up hoping beyond hope that Tom would accept that answer. If he didn't, Harry had no idea what he would do.

Tom examined the boy looking up at him in earnest and turned his thoughts back to the images he had viewed in the boy's mind. This man must be important to the boy if he consumed his protégée's every consideration. Tom mulled over this for a moment before glancing back at Harry.

"This someone you speak of is the man in your thoughts, am I correct?" Harry, truly, surprised, could do nothing but nod in affirmation. "And how is this man so vital to you as to distract you from your studies?" Harry looked to the ground.

"He was my uncle, or at close to an uncle as I could have," he began, not taking his gaze off the floor for dread of what his teacher's reaction might be. "He would come and play with me when no one else would and bring me birthday presents when no one else would, too."

Tom raised a questioning eyebrow. "I thought that no one cared about you in your old life?" Harry looked up, scandalized.

"No! No, what I mean is that Remus was the *only* one to care about me! And, well...I just want...I just want to know if he's alright..." Harry trailed off uncertainly. Of course, the Dark Lord would not be able to help him with that. After all, Remus worked for the Light, against Tom. He sighed, resigned to the fact that he would not be able to master Occlumency at this rate. Tom, however, looked thoughtful.

"I may be able to arrange it so that you can see this Remus of yours in person without your cover being blown." Harry's head shot up, confusion and hope clashing for dominance across his face.

"Really?" Tom smiled.

"Certainly. Of course, my cover can't afford to be blown, either." Harry puzzled this out for a second before realizing what Tom was talking about. He choked.

"You'd go out *in public* just so I could see Remus?" He asked skeptically. Tom smiled again, this time an amused one.

"My dear Mr. Potter, I would not be so dense as to walk into public, at least not without sufficient disguise. But I'm sure it can be arranged." Harry grinned back at him brilliantly. Internally Tom chuckled darkly.

Of course I wouldn't let you go alone, fool boy. Besides, it has been awhile since I last made an appearance to the wizarding world. I think they need reminding that I still hold supremacy over them all.

It was three days later that Harry got his chance. Tom's spy (who would remain unnamed) had reported that Remus would be visiting Diagon Alley with another Order member that day, and so Binky had come early into Harry's bedroom to wake him up and have him dress for an outing. Although still tousle-haired from sleep and stumbling, Harry felt excitement and anticipation flow through him like electricity. He was finally going to be seeing Remus.

Binky showed him to the front hall (a place Harry had never visited before that day) and found Tom waiting for him. If Harry hadn't known that Tom was going with him undercover, he might not have recognized him. Instead of red eyed and raven haired as he was originally, he was now (though Harry had to try very hard not to laugh at this) blond and blue eyed. It looked very, very out of place and Harry said so. Tom glared at him viciously and Harry had the feeling that Tom had gone with this choice against his own personal preference, and Harry agreed with it. Although it didn't suit him at all, he doubted anyone would suspect Tom to walk around looking like

that. He admitted to himself that it was a very clever charade as they walked out the front doors and down to the nearest apparation point.

Harry had seen the grounds from the windows plenty of times, but had never had the good fortune to find the doors that actually led to them. He stopped in his tracks for a moment to inspect his surroundings, but Tom simply grabbed him by the shoulder and steered him firmly towards the forest. Harry grumbled but acquiesced. He would have plenty of time later to explore this new frontier. When they reached the apparation point, Tom took a far tighter grip on Harry's robes and Apparated.

Harry immediately felt the effects. He was vividly reminded of when he had blown up the library, but instead of the flow of power starting from his core, it snaked down from Tom's arm and seized him violently, throwing him forward through a small vortex that made Harry's claustrophobia spring to life.

As suddenly as it stopped it was over. Harry stumbled around, dazed, and leaned against the nearest building as he emptied the contents of his stomach. Tom stood in the background, watching him with slight concern before it was wiped from his face and replaced with a cool, calm expression. He offered his hand to Harry who, still dizzy from the side along Apparation, took it gratefully.

Tom led Harry down the streets of Diagon Alley (after reminding him to put his hood up for secrecy) and directly to a small café on the side of the lane. They both took a seat and Tom evaluated the environment casually, looking for any sign of the werewolf they were going to be "visiting" while Harry leaned against his seat again, still slightly green.

It was awhile before anything happened, but finally a familiar sandy-haired head popped up above the crowd, causing Harry to sit up with such speed that he almost knocked his chair back. He instantly recognized the figure next to him as Sirius, which did not really surprise him. He leaned forward in anticipation as Tom sat back into his seat, hands crossed and watching the scene with amused interest.

Remus strolled down the street of Diagon Alley, discreetly eyeing the nearby buildings for any sign of danger. Sirius walked next to him, hand firmly clamped around the wand that was tucked into his right jacket pocket. Sirius turned to Remus, choosing that moment to speak.

“Keep a look out, Moony; we don’t want to be ambushed.” He warned, turning back to watch his side of the street. Remus spared him a glance before resuming his search.

“What else would I do, Padfoot? It’s not everyday Snape has Albus call an emergency Order meeting to tell us that Voldemort was expecting me to be here tomorrow.” Sirius furrowed his forehead.

“That makes no sense to me. Why would he want you to be here, today, of all places? And for that matter, why you? I thought he was after Lily and James.” At the mention of the Potters Remus’s mouth turned down slightly, but he hitched it back up before Sirius could notice and shrugged.

“I honestly don’t know, Padfoot.” He said, still tired from the last full moon. “All I know is to keep an eye out for as long as were here.” Sirius nodded and silence hung between them for a short time as they casually went in and out of shops, pretending to be interested in the products while waiting for someone to make the first move. They had Order members patrolling the streets, dressed as ordinary wizards, ready to be there in case backup was needed.

The longer they were out there with no sign of being attacked, the more relaxed they became. It was a little longer before they signaled to the other members roaming the streets and, after meeting in the corner of Flourish and Blotts, decided that there had been no attack planned and they decided to start heading for home.

As he watched Remus and Sirius’s retreating backs, Harry turned to see Tom looking at him expectantly. Harry nodded.

“We can go home now.” Tom gave his acknowledgement and they both retreated back to the corner of the Alley where they had Apparated in. Harry eyed Tom wearily, before reluctantly allowing the

man to once again grip his robes and Apparate them back to the keep.

Once inside Harry was immediately sent to bed by a fussing Nagini (who had been waiting in the front hall for them to return) under the pretense that he was “looking very ill and needed to sleep it off, and don’t argue with me”. After changing for bed and glimpsing out the window to the still sunlit lawn, Harry yawned and climbed into bed, tired from the day’s events. Before he slept, though, he sat up and tried once again to clear his mind. Harry smiled sleepily, this time successful in his attempt, and rested soundly without a single dream interrupting his slumber.

Down in the front hall Tom still stood, looking up at the staircase that led to the upper floors shrewdly. Nagini slithered to his side and gazed up at him intently.

“How did it go, Masssssster?” Tom glanced down at Nagini before returning his gaze to the staircase.

“Better than I could have ever expected, Nagini. Thossse foolssss don’t even know what hit them.” He laughed a low, sinister laugh before turning on his heel and heading towards the library, Nagini right behind him. There was still work to be done and he didn’t fancy having to do it tomorrow.

What Harry didn’t know was that, after he and Tom had left Diagon Alley, a squad of his Death Eaters had descended upon the unguarded group of Order members. What ensued was a very bloody fight, though no one suffered anything more than a serious injury on either side. Due to the chaos Diagon Alley had been temporarily closed. While the wounded Order members were shipped off to St. Mungo’s for treatment and Albus Dumbledore alerted to the incident, the four Death Eaters had Apparated back to their Master’s keep, preparing to report on the incident.

For the Dark Lord Voldemort, things couldn’t have gone smoother.

Chapter Seven: Broil and Boil, Trouble and Toil

All he could see was black. Nothingness encompassed him as he floated along in the hollow area, pushing through what seemed to be dark mist. His pursuer tugged at him, and he fought against it as he had been doing for as long as he could remember. Unfortunately, just like every other time, he wasn't strong enough to resist it and he was dragged back to the light...

Harry lay flat on the floor, panting in exertion from his latest try at Legilimency. Tom stood above him, frowning down at Harry in frustration. He had given the child every possible chance to prepare himself for this; he had even assigned Harry to write a five page essay on the steps to Legilimency and had then given him a quiz on the subject the moment he had walked into the training arena, but Harry still seemed incapable of pulling it off. He sighed and held out a hand to help him up, which Harry took. Now back on his feet, Harry prepared himself for another attempt before he was stopped.

"This isn't working as I had planned it to," Tom explained when he saw Harry's questioning face. "Something is holding you back—and don't deny it, I can tell—the only question is what?" He looked at Harry pointedly, who in turn stared down at his shoes.

Harry didn't want to admit it, but the reason why he was having trouble was because he was reluctant to break into his teacher's mind. He wouldn't pretend that he didn't hear the occasional bout of screams that issued from the throne room down the hall, nor would he pretend that it wasn't Tom's Death Eaters—his own loyal servants. Harry shuddered to think of what kinds of memories he might find in there. Nonetheless, he had grown to respect Tom; he didn't want to stumble across anything he shouldn't. It might destroy the man's very slight trust in him.

When Harry didn't respond, Tom sighed and tilted the boy's head up and closely watched his expression. It didn't take him long to figure out what was amiss.

"I have told you before Harry, you will not find anything you shouldn't when you do this," Tom asserted jadedly. "I have already stored away

those memories to a place where you cannot reach them, and I highly doubt that you will be able to see anymore than what I allow you to.” Harry nodded timidly before once more readying himself for another attempt.

A few hours later found Tom once again in his throne room, now awaiting a private meeting with one of his Inner Circle. Seeing as how he still had a few more minutes before his follower showed, he turned his thoughts back to his student.

After the initial hesitation Harry seemed to pick up the art fairly quickly. True, he was nowhere near Tom’s level and probably wouldn’t be for a few years, but he was coming along much faster than Tom himself had anticipated. Now that those two matters of his training were taken care of, it was time to start the boy on something else. He had already planned to bring in someone to begin teaching him how to brew potions, but the main problem he saw was: who? Bella would have been his first choice, but she had never been particularly good at the subject. Lucius was also out; as much as he relied on the man for battle strategies he wouldn’t trust the him with anything else as far as he could throw him—without magic.

The only actual remaining choice was Severus, and he did not even feel entirely sure that choosing him would be a wise decision; he was still questioning himself about his pick of the three, as he did not really know which side Severus was on. Oh yes, the man brought him news of Dumbledore’s movements, but Tom could not be positive how much he wasn’t telling, or how much of his information was real. However it seemed the professor was the only option for a potions teacher that he had left. He sighed and rubbed his temples. It looked like he truly did not have any other choice. He watched emotionlessly as Severus cautiously entered the room for the meeting. He would just have to keep a very close eye on him. He was eternally grateful he had already taught Harry Occlumency; Tom had a feeling the boy might need it.

In another part of the country...

A short series of knocks resounded from the door, startling the old man behind the desk from his paperwork. "Come in." He called, and watched neutrally as Lily and James Potter entered his office. Waving them to two of the chairs in front of the desk, he offered them a lemon drop.

"No thank you, Albus, we're fine." Lily declined, smiling politely as James also refused. Albus nodded in acceptance before putting the bowl of sweets away, steeping his fingers and observing them over the rim of his half-moon spectacles as he began to address them.

"I believe I sent for you a few hours ago. Ministry business?" James nodded.

"They have all the Aurors working over-time to cover up the messes that Voldemort and his slimy snakes are making. I just got home a few minutes ago." Albus turned to Lily, who blushed slightly.

"I was out in Diagon Alley inspecting the damage done from the Death Eater attack when Patty received the message and held it for me. I'm sorry, Albus." Albus inclined his head in recognition before his eyes began to twinkle slightly.

"Now where were we? Oh yes, the reason I called you here on such short notice is because I have a matter to discuss with you; one that involves Chris." The Potters sat up straighter at that, now paying him the utmost attention. Albus fought back a pang in his heart at the sight of this behavior. They still did not seem to care at all about Harry's disappearance, and this display of absolute love on the subject of Chris made his heart ache for the elder Potter son even more than it already was. "Due to the fact that his older brother is missing—in actual fact kidnapped, as I believe he was, by Death Eaters to be used as leverage to get at Chris—that we should really start to prepare him for what fate has planned for him. I have arranged for him to spend a weekend at the Burrow—Molly and Arthur's home, if you remember?—to spend time with their family. As you know they are completely Gryffindor and Light oriented, and I think it would do Chris a lot of good to spend time in the company of their children, who have thus far been instilled with upright morals. It would be good for him to have made Gryffindor friends before he is

sorted and attends Hogwarts.” He gave them a sharp, serious look. “We all know how dangerous a place the world is and Chris will need all the strong friendships and allies he can get if he is to fulfill the prophecy. Do you two agree to this arrangement?” Lily and James both nodded enthusiastically. They were rather fond of Molly and Arthur themselves and enjoyed being around the children—James especially liked Fred and George, though there was no surprise there. Albus gave them a grandfatherly smile as his eyes sparkled even brighter.

“Excellent. I hope you don’t mind if I set it for this weekend?”

Severus sneered down at the young boy next to him in an attempt to mask his absolute alarm at the discovery that he had made.

Of all the things the Dark Lord could have done, he went and assigned him to teaching the little brat—his heir, as the Dark Lord said. And that raised another question! When in the name of Merlin did the Dark Lord find the time to make one—or someone to make one *with*, for that matter? Severus shook his head forcefully to rid himself of these thoughts. He didn’t need them going in *that* particular direction.

Severus and the boy (who he had been instructed to refer to as ‘Young Master’ to Severus’ displeasure) were now setting up the instruments needed to make a basic potion down in the keep’s main potions lab. Severus snuck a glance at the boy from the corner of his eye. He seemed completely fascinated by the gear, which happened to be standard equipment you could get at any potions supply store in the world, as if the instruments were rare and exotic specimens that were there purely for the purpose of examination. He barely managed to restrain himself from rolling his eyes. If the boy didn’t even know how to properly use a cauldron then Severus knew he had his work cut out for him.

Harry, sensing someone watching him rather intensely, chose that moment to look up. As he met the potion’s professor’s coal black eyes the man sneered at him and turned back to his end of the table.

“If you can’t even set up the cauldron properly, Young Master,” he hardly kept from spitting the title, “then we will have a lot of trouble teaching you how to properly brew potions.” Satisfied with his jab, he turned back to placing the ingredients on the table, not thinking for even a moment that the boy was humble enough to ask for help.

He was proven wrong. “Would you help me then, sir?” Severus stopped what he was doing and turned to stare at the boy in disbelief. Not only was he asking for assistance after being insulted (though indirectly) but he had enough manners to call him ‘sir’; the boy had already shown him more respect than all of his 7th year Gryffindor students combined in all their years at Hogwarts. Still dumbfounded, he showed him how to set things up and how to properly place out the ingredients.

Maybe this job wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Harry listened to the instructions that the Professor was giving him closely, focusing all of his concentration on stirring the liquid in his cauldron exactly the correct number of times. He refused to get anything less than perfect on his first try, and prove that he could do this. He would not have said it aloud, but he had been offended by the teacher’s earlier statement on his lack of knowledge, but had swallowed his pride and requested aid. He wouldn’t go around looking like a fool because he was too stuck up to ask for assistance when he needed it; besides, that would have disappointed Tom and Nagini, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Finishing the last rotation, he carefully checked the temperature of the fire to make sure it wouldn’t blow up with his back turned, fixed the timer to fifteen minutes, and turned to the older man behind him.

Severus gave the boy a cold look, before leaning over slightly to check the potion. He grudgingly admitted that it looked good so far. He spun slightly to watch the boy (as to ascertain he wouldn’t knock over anything toxic and/or sharp/dangerously blunt, kill himself and get Severus punished/tortured for it) and was amused to see the boy struggling to reach the countertop.

Harry looked around the room, put out by his lack of success before spotting a low spindly stool in the corner of the room. He retrieved it and, after hopping onto it, scrambled up to the slightly rough surface of the table. He grinned brightly at his teacher in triumph; Severus just shook his head.

Several quiet minutes passed, marked only by their steady breathing and the bubbling of the cauldron as it boiled before Severus could take it no longer.

"You're not what I thought you would be like." Harry gazed at him in mild curiosity. "When I first learned you were his heir, I admit that I had thought you would be rather...arrogant." The boy was quiet for a short while before smiling at him slightly.

"And you're not as greasy as I imagined you to be when I first heard your name." Severus was taken aback by this before he scoffed.

"Touché." The Potions Master smirked slightly as a new barb came to mind. "Though you are far shorter than I thought you would be, too." Harry puffed up indignantly at this, and Severus wondered how in the name of Merlin any heir of the Dark Lord's could act so...childishly. It just didn't seem to fit to him. He also wondered why he was acting so casually around the boy; for him it was just not natural. His musings were interrupted as the timer went off, and he swept over to the table to check on the potion. He was surprised at what he saw. He waited a few minutes for it to cool before ladling some of it into a vial and holding it up to the light for inspection. The potion was the required sunshine yellow that identified it as a Euphoria Elixir. He scowled. The boy had somehow managed to get the potion perfect on his first try. He looked down as he felt a sudden tug on the sleeve of his billowing black robes; Harry looked up at him in curiosity before pointing to the vial Severus held in his hand.

"How'd I do? Did I do well? What potion did you have me make, anyways? What's it do?" Severus slowly processed this and bit back an annoyed groan before walking over to a shelf on the wall and placing the container there. Extracting his wand from his sleeve, a single flick of his wand had a label reading its name placed on it. He turned to answer the boy's questions.

Severus struggled with himself for awhile before giving up. "You did well. You got it perfect on the first try. That was a Euphoria Elixir; it generates a feeling of euphoria in the drinker and there are several side effects including singing and, on some occasions," Severus grimaced here, "nose-tweaking. You can add a sprig of peppermint to the brew to counter-act these. It's a fairly intermediate level potion to make, not too difficult for one just starting to learn."

There, make it seem easy to do. Can't have you getting too arrogant yet, he thought as he began cleaning up the table. He handed Harry the cauldron. "Go wash this out." As Harry went to do as he was told Severus packed away the unused ingredients and stepped back to inspect the work place. Nothing was left on the table, the area was clean, no spare elements for potion making anywhere...he glanced towards Harry to see the boy tugging a now clean and slightly damp copper cauldron over to a row of them. Harry returned to stand by the professor.

"That is it for today's lesson. The next one will be in two days. For your homework, look through the potions books in the Lord's library and pick a potion. Write a three page essay on why you picked that potion; expect to brew it when you turn in the essay. It would be wise to memorize as much of the brewing process as you can." He added as an afterthought before dismissing his student. Harry stopped four paces from the door and looked back at him.

"Thank you for the lesson, Professor." Severus jumped slightly before turning back to the work table.

"That is an inappropriate title; you are my Lord's heir and as such you may refer to me as Severus." He forced out. He didn't want the Dark Lord to come to the conclusion that Severus was 'abusing' his position as the boy's teacher to gain more power or brainwashing the boy to think that Severus was of a higher status than him. Harry nodded in acceptance.

"Then you can call me Harry." Severus turned to stare at him in shock before opening his mouth to explain to the stupid child *why* that would be a bad idea, but he was cut off. "That's an order, and you have to listen to me, right?" Severus simply nodded, halfway knowing where

the boy was going with this. "Then I order you to call me Harry. No exceptions." Severus was still in shock as Harry smiled and left the room. He now found that he had an answer to his previous question; the boy was clever enough.

Harry entered the library later, not at all surprised to see Tom sitting behind his desk, scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment. He dropped into a seat across from him.

"Why'd you do it?" Tom tilted his head up and shot Harry a calculating expression.

"Do what, Harry?" Harry frowned. He wasn't in the mood for this, but knew better than to push the man. It seemed he was in a good disposition over something; Harry wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know why.

"Why'd you tell Severus that I'm your heir?" Tom raised his eyebrow.

"On a first name basis with him already I see." Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes. Tom was avoiding the question.

"Can you please just answer the question?" Tom set his quill down and steepled his fingers, purposefully taking an infuriatingly long time to answer.

"I had been meaning to tell you this at dinner, but it seems that now is just as well a time to tell you as any other and I will tell you straight out. I am planning on making you my heir, Harry." Harry gaped at him.

"You're kidding." Tom frowned seriously. *Now is not the time for you to go into shock, boy.*

"No I'm not. Have you known me to jest about anything? Ever?" Harry closed his mouth and slumped down into his seat. Things had just gotten complicated.

"Why me?" Tom chuckled lightly.

“Who else would I have, Harry? You’re my student; you’re the right age for the ritual that would make you my heir, even though we are not related by blood. Who else?” Tom smiled slightly. “Besides, Nagini would be overjoyed. You would never be rid of her and I know you like her company.”

Harry shook his head and bit back a groan, trying his hardest to process this new revelation. As if Nagini wasn’t constantly fussing over him already...Excusing himself quietly, he retreated to his room, unaware of the concerned gaze that followed him out the door.

On the other side of the keep, Severus made his way hastily down the steps and to the apparation point. He needed to tell Albus.

Severus knocked on the door of the Headmaster’s office a short time later and waited for the older man to invite him in. When he did so, Severus hurried into the room. Albus looked at him in concern.

“My dear boy, what’s the matter? Did something happen during the meeting? It did take far longer than usual.” Severus shook his head.

“No. Albus...*he has an heir.*” All the color in Albus’ face drained, and the twinkle in his eyes dimmed substantially.

“Explain.” And so Severus did.

Albus leaned back in his chair, gazing out of the window as he contemplated this new element. “Thank you for telling me this. Continue to teach him and report back to me anything unusual you find.” He frowned slightly before dismissing the Potions Master. It seemed things were picking up far faster than he originally thought they would.

The weekend approached quickly; Chris was brought to the Burrow to spend the weekend with the Weasleys. He didn’t really like Percy too much; something told him that he stuck up, besides the piece of parchment that Fred and George had glued to the back of his shirt broadcasting that fact. He liked them, as did James; they got along

fairly well enough. Ginny was annoying to him; she never knew when to be quiet.

He liked Ron the best, even though the boy was a year older than he was. Time passed by quickly for the group as they enjoyed their time together with pranks, card games, chasing gnomes and playing Quidditch before Sunday arrived. Molly announced that she need to make a visit to Diagon Alley; Fred and George 'volunteered' to go with her (she didn't trust them in the house without her supervision).

"Alright then, Harry, let me see your essay." Severus stated, still not comfortable with calling the boy by his name. Harry handed him the parchment and Severus skimmed over it, frowning when he realized what potion the boy had picked.

"This is a very difficult potion to brew, even for those with experience. Are you certain you wish to make it?" Harry nodded vigorously and Severus sighed. They would have to go to Diagon Alley for the majority of these ingredients.

Lovely. Severus thought sarcastically.

They arrived by Apparation in the same corner of the street where Tom and Harry had arrived in a few days ago. The Alley hadn't changed since then, although a lot of people would glance around themselves nervously. It seemed they all remembered the Death Eater attack. Severus led Harry briskly down the street to the Apothecary shop. Many people edged out of his way and Harry had little wonder why. He did seem to be rather intimidating with his billowing robes. Harry wondered idly if he could learn how to do that. He fought back the temptation to laugh as he imagined the look on Severus' face should he ask.

They entered the shop, which was dimly lit and very cool inside. Tightly sealed jars lined the walls, some of them laden with dust and others looking as if they had recently been handled. Harry hovered in the dark corner of the store as Severus went about collecting the needed ingredients to make the potion Harry had selected for the day.

Movement near the door caught Harry's eye, and he watched as two red-haired boys slipped quietly into the store and snuck about with the air of professionals. Harry felt his eyes narrow and he silently followed them in the shadows. The two boys, twins he could now see, where now slithering up behind Severus, who was inspecting a jar whose label Harry could not see. Before they could slip around a shelf, though, Harry snagged them both by the backs of their collars and, although both were larger than he was, they fell backwards from the sudden and unexpected tug. Harry gazed down on them emotionlessly.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked sharply. He spotted one of them slipping something back into their worn-looking robes and he quickly and efficiently hitched it out of his hands; it appeared to be some sort of round object, and a cautious whiff of it identified it as a dung bomb. Harry's nose curled up in disgust at the smell. The other boys watched him, wide eyed in awe.

"You're the first person to ever sneak up on us!" the first said, hoisting himself off the ground. He had to crouch down a little bit in order to avoid being seen over the edge of the low rising shelf blocking them from the view of the rest of the store.

"We were just going to play a prank on Snape." The second boy pointed to Severus' shadowy back. "He's always picking on my brothers at school. He teaches the potions class and has it out for the Gryffs." He eyed Harry shrewdly. "Who are you, anyways?" Harry's mind fumbled for a name and he came up with the first one that popped into his mind.

"Raven." He said, silently sending his thanks to the jar resting to the left of the boys' heads on the shelf ("Shredded Raven's Wings"). The boys nodded.

"I'm Fred," the first one offered, performing a flourishing bow with an awkward bend due to his height. The second one grinned cheekily and gave his brother a swift but obviously well practiced push to the side, knocking him off balance and sending him to the floor.

"And I'm George. Though you can call us--" Harry watched in amazement as they entwined their left and right arms (Fred's right,

George's left) and offered him both hands at once while pulling off a twisted version of a petite curtsy that Harry was sure would have made any normal person trip, "Gred and Forge."

Harry couldn't help it. He laughed. These guys were perhaps the first people he had known around his age other than Chris, and he didn't really count, seeing as how they were brothers. He smiled and offered them his hands. He liked these blokes already. However, the moment was ruined as a dark silhouette fell over them and Harry looked up to see Severus curling his lip up into a sneer at the sight of Fred and George. Both boys had lost all color in their faces. Severus turned to Harry.

"We're done here. Come." Harry sent them an apologetic look, and was surprised to see them sending him one as well. A tense moment pervaded the air between the four of them until a shrill voice cut through it like a knife.

"*Fred! George! There you are!*" the two boys cringed as a plump red haired woman stormed up to them and entered the store, scaring away any potential customers the owner might have had. He glared at her heatedly but she paid him no heed; Severus looked as if Christmas had come early as he smirked at the duo, who were as of now milk white in the face.

"What in the name of Merlin are you *doing* here? You had better not be pulling jokes on people *again*, or else I swear I'll...Oh..." she trailed off, catching sight of Harry and Severus standing in the background; Fred and George were cowering at this point. The woman suddenly looked sheepish. "I'm sorry for that, Professor Snape, and if they were bothering you. I'll just collect them now and be on my way..." she smiled at Harry, who was hiding meekly behind Severus in the face of this fiery woman, before turning and grabbing both boys by the ears. She led them away and out of the store, ignoring their cries of pain and indignation at the treatment the whole way. They gave Harry a miserable wave farewell and a shout of "Cya later, mate!" before they were pulled out of sight. Harry turned to Severus bewildered, but the man just shook his head and, still looking particularly like a cat that had just swallowed the canary, escorted Harry back to the keep for the lesson.

Chapter Eight: A Flighty Ally

It was a few days later that an extremely tired and sore Harry tottered into his room and collapsed on his bed in a heap. He laid there for a few moments before painstakingly flipping himself over onto his back, his dull green eyes slowly searching the ceiling as he wished fervently for sleep to take him.

When Tom had said that learning to use wandless magic would be exhausting he had not even been able to *fathom* just how difficult it actually was. Harry groaned and turned back over onto his stomach, burrowing his aching head into the thankfully soft and cushioning pillow at the head of the bed. He never wanted to leave this bed again.

The first thing Tom had made him do was levitate a feather. Simple sounding enough, especially when Tom himself did it effortlessly—but no, it was a lot harder than it looked. Harry had spent at least a half hour just standing there, focusing all of his will into forcing the feather into the air before Tom deigned to correct him and his...technique. Instead of forcing his will onto the object in question, Tom had told him, you must find a compromise with it. To Harry it sounded stupid, but he dared not voice aloud his thought and instead tried to do just that; it took him an entire hour to get *that* method down, and Harry had been pleased with himself, content with his training for the day. But *no*, Tom had to push him. Harry recalled groaning in earnest when Tom then placed a book in front of him. Levitating the feather had been difficult enough, but Tom just had to up the ante. Harry grunted in pain as he felt a particularly agonizing throb resound somewhere in the vicinity of his temple. He didn't think he'd be able to survive if he had to do this everyday.

Harry buried his head further into the soft material of his pillow, just drifting off into a blissfully painless sleep when a loud *thump* echoed from his door. He just barely kept himself from screaming in frustration; Nagini always announced her presence that way and he really didn't feel like putting up with someone at the moment. He pulled his comforter over his head, determined to just block out the

irritating noise when it came again, only stronger and more persistent than before.

"I know you're in there, Harry, now open thisssss door!" Nagini's voice reverberated through Harry's skull and he simply pulled the comforter tighter around his head. Silence reigned for a few moments, moments in which Harry basked in the euphoric silence before a loud crash sounded from behind the abused door, accompanied by a loud and demanding cry of *"Harry, you open thisss door thisss very moment or I'll knock down thisss piece of wood that keepsss you in there! You can't jussst ignore me!"* Harry shot up in his bed, his vision dancing in front of him as the echo of the crash hummed in his head. Gaining his bearings, Harry groaned and slid out of his bed to answer the door before Nagini broke it down. He *really* didn't feel like dealing with this.

Harry reached the door and resignedly opened it, Nagini slithering in with a smug air of triumph radiating from her. Before Harry could blink she had slid up the side of his bed and settled herself into the warm indent in the mattress that Harry had occupied not moments before, hissing in a satisfied way. Harry scowled at her. She had taken his spot. Closing the door resolutely behind him, he shambled back over to the four poster bed and hauled himself back up onto its feathery fabric. His hand reached out and began to absently stroke the snake on her scaly head.

"Masssster hasss told me that you did very well for your firssst try, Harry." Nagini hissed happily. She nudged his hand and flicked her tongue out over the skin of his palm. *"You ssshould be proud, child,"* she told him decisively, spotting the slightly sour and disbelieving look on his face, *"Masssster doesss not ussually give sssuch high praisse to anyone, and I know him, child; I have known him for yearsss."* Harry sighed and fell back onto his back, propping his arms behind his head.

"I know," he said solemnly. *"It'sss jussst ssso hard. I don't think I'll lassst for much longer if I have to do thisss everyday. I'm tired and hurting enough ass it iss."* Harry fell silent, silently enjoying her company. Nagini searched his countenance with concerned jewel eyes.

"You will be fine, sserpent child," she reassured him as she wound her tail around him in a semblance of a hug. *"Massster will not pusssh you to sssuch extremes until he feelssss you are ready. He would not risssk your health ssso carelesssly."* Harry sighed and nodded.

"I know, Nagini," he said soberly. *"I know."*

Harry could not tell how much time had passed as he laid there, held snugly in Nagini's shiny coils, before he felt the light grasps of sleep beginning to take him. He smiled slightly as he drifted off to sleep, thinking that this must be what it felt like to be held by a mother. He did not even consider the irony of the thought before he surrendered to unconsciousness.

Severus entered the dungeon's potions lab as Harry finished setting up his equipment for the day's lesson. Harry was not nearly as sore today as he had been yesterday when Nagini had come to visit him; Tom had given him the day off today for his session with Severus, claiming that the man didn't need Harry collapsing from exhaustion on him—and besides, what kind of impression would that set? So Harry had, to his great pleasure, no class with Tom.

Severus stopped next to the young boy and hid a smile. It was amazing, but the boy seemed to be truly gifted in the art of Potions—as far as Severus could see, anyways. He had successfully managed to make Veritaserum the previous lesson (though it had taken many trial and errors and extreme caution on both their parts) and he had by no means brewed it perfectly, but he was much farther along in the process than many of Severus' own students at Hogwarts. Which reminded him...

Severus grimaced in distaste. In less than two weeks he would have to return to his teaching post at the school to try and force some semblance of intelligence into those dunderheads that he had to teach for the majority of the year. Which included the Gryffindors...

Severus snapped out of his morbid reverie and turned his attention back to the boy before him. "Today we will be brewing the Wit-Sharpening Potion," he stated bluntly. "Since I have had you

memorize the process for homework, I expect you to be able to do it with minimal difficulty. Get to work.” Harry nodded and went to fill his cauldron with water. Severus retreated to the desk he had set up in the corner of the room during the previous lesson and watched Harry carefully as he brought his cauldron back and proceeded to prepare the ingredients. After some time, in which Harry finished cutting up the ginger roots and grinding the scarab beetles into a fine dust, went on to add them at the appropriate times, stirring when needed and monitoring the flames with precision.

Watching him, Severus had to admit he was impressed. If the boy ever attended Hogwarts he would be one of his prized students. He was vaguely reminded of himself when he had first started brewing potions, and he had to admit that they both went about the process the same way. A sardonic smile twisted his lips as a thought occurred to him. Yes, Harry would be able to rival Severus’ own abilities in potion making, and he was certain that if the Dark Lord ever found out the extent of his heir’s talents in the field that, when the boy masters the art, Severus was sure that the Dark Lord would deliver a quick *Avada Kedavra* and *bam*, so ends his life. Severus shivered. The thought of it chilled him. He was starting to outlive his usefulness to the man, and he knew he suspected him and questioned his loyalties. Albus, trusting fool that he was, did not even consider the idea of Severus turning traitor; it took no small amount of ingenuity to figure out which of the two he would have to be careful around. As it was, Severus was confident that only he knew where his loyalties truly lay.

A few days earlier...

Molly flooed back into the Burrow, frowning with disapproval at the two boys she had made go before her. Fred and George, acting in their usual goofy manner, flitted back to the living room where the rest of the children were. She entered the kitchen and began to make lunch.

She had no idea where the twins got off, going and bothering a Hogwarts professor like that—especially when he was doing his shopping! Molly felt angry red begin to creep into her face. They had

better not have tried to play a prank on the man; Molly knew Professor Snape did not like Gryffindors, and she knew the two would end up there, no doubt of it. They didn't need to give the Potions Master any more incentive to dislike them than he would already have.

This brought her back to the circumstances on which she had met him. She recalled the small boy who had hid behind the man's legs when she started in on her two sons. She wondered idly who he was. A nephew, perhaps? Maybe. But for some reason that didn't sit well with her. The boy projected an aura that was familiar to her; she just couldn't place her finger on it. He had radiated pure power, though hidden it was, yes, but there was something else...

Her reverie paused in its flow for awhile as she finished lunch and called the family in to seat themselves at the table. Chris would be going home today, she mused, and she wanted to send him off with a good memory of his time here. The boy was a sweetheart, but he was a little too much like Fred and George for her peace of mind, but that didn't mean she couldn't do something to make him feel welcome here anytime. As the kids came in and started in on the food, she watched them fondly, though with a slightly severe outlook as her gaze passed over the twins. Finally, her eyes landed on Chris, studying him as he interacted with the boys and ignored Ginny, flinging a bit of mashed potatoes onto Ron's face...

That's when it clicked. That boy, from the Apothecary shop...

He had had the same kind of aura that surrounded Chris; she would have to tell Albus of her discovery. She was sure it was important somehow; she just didn't know why.

Severus entered the Headmaster's office, feeling a slight pull of anxiety settle into his stomach. It wasn't rare for Albus to call a private meeting between the two, but he had a feeling that this was more than just that.

His theory was proven to be correct. Taking a seat as he was bidden, the first unusual thing about the meeting was that Albus did not offer him lemon drops—surely unheard of. He didn't smile, either, or ask

the Potions Master how he was, or how his preparations for the new school year were coming along. He simply sat back in his chair, scrutinizing Severus over the rim of his glasses with intense blue eyes; eyes that were certainly *not* twinkling. Severus felt his disease grow.

A few moments passed between them with only silence and disguised tension hanging as a barrier. Severus tried his hardest not to fidget under the Headmaster's burning gaze. Finally, the elder man spoke.

"Molly has come to me with rather interesting news, Severus," his voice was soft but unyielding. Severus scrambled to find anything that the Weasley woman might have to snitch on him, and his heart plummeted as he hit upon the source.

He knows. Severus forced himself to meet the man's eyes. "Really?" He offered coolly. "Do tell." While outside he had put up a calm façade, inside he felt his guts writhing about. This was not good.

Albus leaned forward and, after propping his elbows on the desk and holding up his head with the back of his folded hands, said amiably, "Why yes. She reported to me that she found you in the company of a young boy during your recent visit to Diagon Alley—nothing too incriminating, given that I might have just assigned you to leading around a Muggleborn on their first trip to Diagon Alley..." his face grew sharp. "However, I do not recall giving you such instructions, and I'm quite certain that you have no nephews that you might have been temporarily in the custody of, as Molly thought. I am glad she told me, however, otherwise I would have been blind to this excursion." Albus leaned forward and caught Severus' eye. "I had hoped that you would tell me just who it was you were escorting, Severus." He finished pleasantly, waiting.

A few tense moments passed and Severus felt nervous sweat beginning to dot his forehead. He had not thought about the consequences of having Harry out there where anyone could see the two of them—and he had certainly not thought the woman would have enough insight to inform Albus of it. He cast his mind around for

a change of subject—*any* change of subject that could get them off of this topic, and finally settled on one.

“The Dark Lord’s heir, of course,” Severus responded smoothly, silently thankful that Albus already knew of his existence. “As you know, I have been assigned the task of teaching him the art of Potions. I was simply commanded to take him to Diagon Alley for a practical lesson in identifying different potions ingredients. It would have looked suspicious should I have declined, Headmaster.” He finished silkily, silently praying that the man would take the bait. Albus regarded him quietly for a moment before nodding.

“Certainly,” he said, all edge and tension melting from his features as he relaxed, temporarily convinced of Severus’ innocence. “We would not have wanted him to begin to question you. I am glad that you have cleared that up.” His eyes began twinkling again. “I can suppose that Molly’s twins had made an attempt to prank you?” Severus, glad for the change of subject, sneered.

“Of course. I loathe the day that they start to attend Hogwarts. The castle will not last.” Albus chuckled.

“Why Severus, it won’t be so bad. They cannot possibly be worse than the Marauders were.” Unaware, or at least ignoring, the souring expression on his Potions professor’s face, Albus smiled and offered him a lemon drop before he left. Severus, relieved to be released and at the very least out of the line of fire for the day, declined and swept from the room. He did not know, however, that as he left Albus watched his back with intense eyes, silently considering. Fawkes remained silent.

Chapter Nine: The Ties That Bind

Harry stood before the tall, intimidating oaken doors that separated him from the task ahead and gulped fearfully. Desperate to see something other than the doors he had been staring at uncertainly for the last half hour, he glanced back down at his (admittedly) odd attire.

The robes themselves were made of an almost blindingly pure white; gold embroidery flowed around the collar and along the hem and cuffs, entwined here and there with a spackle of silver or copper. The belt around his waist consisted of heavy gold and set gems. Harry had found the outfit resting on the foot of his bed earlier this morning and had been curtly instructed by a conveniently placed note to wear it and report to the Ceremonial Chamber—with directions included, naturally. One look at the almost sacrificial white of the wear gave Harry a very ominous feeling.

He brought himself back to earth and steadied himself with a deep breath. *Now or never, you can't keep him waiting forever you know*, he told himself as he stepped forward and shakily opened the doors to the room.

He almost immediately stepped back out again, every nerve in his body screaming that he was making a mistake, a grave one, here. The chamber itself didn't help.

There was very little light; what there was of it was given off by seemingly random spurts of different colored candles placed around the room in a pattern that Harry had no hopes of identifying. Pillars, dark and almost inscrutable in design, spiraled up and out of sight into the shadowy recesses of the vaulted ceiling above his head. Hard, murky gray stone stretched out under his small feet; nearing the center of the room the stone lashed out into runic symbols, spiraling into itself to a point and incased within a five-pointed star, small inscriptions bordering the edges. Harry cast his wide eyes around the room and felt a sick feeling rise in his stomach as he made out a dilapidated table at the far reaches of the chamber, laden with very Dark looking objects and sharp implements rusted almost to the point of decay with what looked suspiciously like dried blood. But

what really topped it off were the equally blood-rusted chains that were anchored to the floor amidst the center of the sinister floor designs.

Harry was going to be ill.

"I had hoped that the elves would have had enough sense to clean this place out before I made use of it," came a dry voice from behind him. Harry jumped but didn't bother to turn around, against his better judgment. Tom strolled past Harry and stopped in the heart of the chamber, as if nothing at all was out of the ordinary with the blood-rusted chains and almost occultist symbols swimming beneath his boots. He gestured for the flabbergasted Harry to join him and it took the young boy a few moments to gather his wits before complying. Harry tried his best not to look at the floor and gave the chains a wide berth as he joined Tom. The man barely spared him a glance (more than likely to ensure that Harry was indeed wearing the correct robes) before nodding.

"We are here, Harry, to participate in an ancient ceremony, as the name of the room may imply," he said, dragging Harry's attention away from the odd snake carvings embedded in the pillars. "As I have already told you, I plan to make you my heir...but not only in name, but in blood. I wish to keep unpleasant...repercussions...from my followers and others from happening, should we do otherwise. Now, if you would kindly stand on the other side of the pentagram..." Tom gestured to the point of the symbol opposite of his position and Harry moved, unsure of what was about to happen.

"You will not have to do much, Harry," Tom assured him as he spotted the slightly worried expression on his protégée's face. Just do as I say when I do it. Understand?" Harry nodded hesitantly. "Very good. Now..."

Suddenly as if on command the candle light in the room dimmed, and Harry had to repress violent memories of a certain dungeon cell as the growing darkness closed in on him. All was quiet for a brief moment before a voice, although quiet, rang out in the still silence.

"Meus maiores..." Harry jumped, goose bumps running down his arms as the chilling voice continued in its solitary mantra. "Incedo a

arbitro isritus..." Harry felt himself jump again, this time feeling the gentle caress of magic subtly pulling at his limbs, making them go numb but heavy. He forced himself to breathe evenly even as it closed in on him; his vision was growing foggy and the voice was beginning to sound distant... "Inde quamobremis pactum...Quae demo addo sino id didico..." Harry had now lost all feeling of his body and he couldn't even tell up from down anymore.

His mind was cloudy and he felt himself almost tuning in and out of consciousness. *Whose is that voice?* He thought to himself murkily as the voice rang out again, even more faint than before and almost indistinguishable. *Who is that...?*

Harry couldn't think anymore. The last thing he remembered was hearing a quiet tone finishing "...vos sis...nos..."

Harry was jolted awake what felt like not a second later. Tom looked down at him, removing his spidery hand from the boy's shoulder.

"Harry..." his mind was still foggy and he couldn't hear quite properly. "Harry...*Boy, wake up!*"

Harry shot upright at the speed of a bullet, knocking Tom (who was now kneeling next to where he lay) backwards in his haste.

"Er, sorry?" Harry said, sheepish. Tom simply raised an eyebrow before rising and dusting himself off.

"It's time for your part of the ceremony, boy," came the sharp reply, his irritation at being bowled over still evident. Harry fought back a blush and also rose to his feet, ungainly though he was at the moment; he still hadn't quite recovered his sense of bearing yet. Harry jerked slightly as he felt the cold steel of a blade being pressed into his palm and he yelped slightly, yanking the offended body part away from its antagonist. Tom raised an eyebrow again at his abrupt reaction.

"For the blood ceremony," he explained curtly at Harry's questioning look and held up another vial, also filled with what appeared to be blood—Tom's blood. Harry nodded and inspected his hand as Tom

sauntered over to a cauldron that he must have surely set up during Harry's incapacitation. No visible reminder of the injury remained; not even a slight scratch. Harry turned his hand over, marveling at this small wonder before a hissing snapped his attention back to Tom. The cauldron bubbled and fizzed—he could not see what color or texture the potion was, for he was far too short to reach the top of the table—before it settled and Tom ladled some of the substance into two more vials. Harry wandered over to the table and Tom handed him one of the glasses. Harry brought it up to his eyes and examined it closely.

The liquid itself looked rather gooey, in Harry's opinion, and from what he had learned from Snape's lessons potions of that nature tended to taste horrible. Harry's face distorted in disgust as he continued his inspection. Relatively clear in color, it held a slightly greenish-blue tinge to it that did not look particularly appealing. Harry reminded himself that Tom was not the greatest Potions brewer in the world before he could stop himself and looked up at the older man's amused visage.

"It's not poisoned, you know; I have to drink it too." He asserted, and Harry smiled guiltily before steeling himself. Uncorking the vial, he shot one last tense look at the concoction and its maker before giving a simple "Cheers" and downing it before he lost his nerve.

The glass fell to the ground with a shatter as a spasm of agony exploded in Harry's stomach and spread like fire through his veins and all the way to his head. His insides felt like they were melting under the extreme heat he was enduring and his brain began to go numb. Harry fell to his knees clutching his midsection and vaguely heard the sound of another doing to same not too far from him, but gave it no thought as blissful blackness claimed him once more.

Harry once again woke from unconsciousness, this time much more naturally and comfortably than before. Although he had his eyes closed, he could tell that he was under the comforter on his feather mattress by the familiar feel of the material against his skin. Harry felt an unusual weight draped upon his body and cracked his eyes opened slightly, only for them to meet the shiny surface of Nagini's

glimmering emerald scales. He propped himself up slightly, careful not to disturb the sleeping serpent and glanced at the window in passing. It was no later than midday, so he could not have been out for too terribly long...

His eyes suddenly shot to the door as it opened but he relaxed when he saw it was only Tom. He leaned back against his pillows and watched as Tom wandlessly summoned an armchair for him to rest upon. The Dark wizard steepled his fingers and regarded Harry curiously for a moment.

"So." He said simply, after an extended period of silence in which the only thing heard was a slightly wheezy hiss emitted from Nagini as she stirred slightly in her sleep. Harry began to fidget, uncomfortable with the attention before Tom spoke again. "Do you feel any different?"

Harry thought about it. Not really; well, of course he was tired and slightly sore from falling to the stone floor one too many times that day, but that was to be expected...Magically? Harry closed his eyes and dug deeper. Not really there, either...though his magic *did* seem a tad darker than it had before...

Harry opened his eyes and shook his head. Tom smiled. "Good, then there are no side effects." Harry blanched in horror and Tom chuckled.

"I thought you might be distressed by that notion, but obviously you are alive and well, so you need not worry about that."

"Did it work?" Harry asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. Tom tipped his head to the side slightly and examined Harry.

"It seems to have," he conceded eventually. "You do not seem substantially different, but that is a good sign. However, I am confident it has, and now..." his smile turned a tad sinister. "We are...family, I suppose, now that we are bound by blood." Harry looked down upon the sleeping familiar lying across his lap and stroked her head for a moment in thought.

“So, that would mean that I can call you...father?” he asked timidly, not quite sure how Tom would react to that endearment. Tom seemed to consider it before nodding slowly.

“Yes, technically that would make me your...father...” He seemed to be debating with himself over something, and Harry couldn’t begin to fathom what. What he did notice, however, was that Tom was now fingering a pocket of his robes and Harry wondered cautiously what might be concealed there. Tom, apparently oblivious to the attention, at last drew out a heavy looking golden locket from his robes and held it out to Harry for inspection.

The locket, shiny and very official looking to Harry, had an ornate silver S engraved upon it. Harry cautiously took it and shifted it from hand to hand, acquainting himself with the feel of it. Tom watched him closely.

“This locket is somewhat of a...heirloom, to...our...family, originally owned by Salazar Slytherin himself,” Tom explained. “It was...passed down...to me by my late uncle for safekeeping.” He paused and seemed to gather his composure here, but Harry did not notice, still consumed in his examination of the trinket. “I have decided that I would like you to wear this, Harry. It would ensure you safe passage through these halls, and any other encampment our side may have, from ignorant Death Eaters. It also serves as a symbol of our family and should be worn proudly. I have charmed it so only you and I may take it off once it is placed accordingly.” Harry nodded and fixed the clasp behind the nape of his neck, feeling the ancient magic lock the treasure in place. He tucked it beneath his night shirt and out of sight, before turning to smile at Tom.

“I will keep it safe...father.” Tom gave him a sardonic smile and rose from his chair (which vanished as he did so) and left, shutting the door softly behind him. Harry sat there smiling for a few moments before looking down at Nagini and groaning. He had forgotten to ask...father...to take Nagini with him before she woke up. No doubt she was going to mother him for passing out.

Harry sighed and reclined back into his pillows once more, continuing his previous occupation of petting the sleeping serpent.

Oh well. Such is life.

“No no no, not like that,” Remus exclaimed before sighing and rubbing his eyes wearily as a hyperactive five year old bounded across the room, unleashing a zeal of energy and playfulness upon the room. Remus felt sorry for the poor house elves for having to clean up after the boy, but felt sorrier for him for having responsibility of him.

Albus had requested that he begin to tutor Chris so that he may get a head start in his magical education. Remus bit back an irate growl that rose in his throat. Albus could be having him spend that valuable time searching for Harry, but *no*, he had him teach a little kid instead when Sirius or even Lily could have had an easier time of it.

Don't get him wrong, he loved Chris dearly, but every time he looked at the happy, carefree boy he was reminded of the reason Harry was gone in the first place; his parent's obvious favoritism towards the younger sibling. He held back another growl and rubbed his temples this time. Thinking about the way Lily and James had been acting as of late always got him in a bad mood.

A rubber toy bounced off his hand and was promptly scooped up again by a giggling toddler. Of course, that did nothing to help the problem.

He groaned wearily and turned to the young child before him. “Okay, Chris,” he stated, fully prepared to be ignored once again, “you do *not* set your Uncle Moony's robes on fire, no matter what Daddy or Uncle Padfoot say.” Chris looked up, gurgling happily at the mention of Sirius.

“Uncle Pa'foo!” he squealed, throwing the werewolf plushie he held in his arms into the air in jubilation. Remus hung his head in defeat. *This is impossible*. He sighed again and looked Chris square in the eye.

“You want Uncle Padfoot?” Chris squealed again and tugged on Remus' already thoroughly abused sleeve. Remus carefully detached him and sat him down on a nearby stool. “Then stay here and *don't* move until Uncle Moony gets back with Uncle Padfoot. Okay?” Chris

noded enthusiastically and Remus left, shutting the door behind him and bolting it for extra safety measure. He wasn't three steps into the hall before a loud crash resounded from the room he had just left, giddy giggling echoing after him as he continued down the hall.

He groaned. This was a job for Sirius, not him. *Let him deal with the little monster*, he thought glumly as he went to fetch his old friend. *Merlin knows I have no hopes of ever controlling him, much less making him listen to what I say.*

It was at times like these that he really felt the absence of Potter's eldest child, the one that would sit quietly and read a book or talk to Remus on subjects that should be far beyond his comprehension.

Another crash echoed down the hallway behind him, followed by the screech of dismay from a house elf that had popped in to act as damage control for the sugar high toddler.

Where are you, Harry?

Chapter Ten: His Father's Son

The room was dark; the only light was from the flames that danced and flickered in the ornate marble grate. Harry sat in the center of his bed as he had done many times before, chewing his lip lightly in apprehension as he cast his eyes over the many open tomes laid out before him. He sighed and knuckled his forehead in trepidation at the magnitude of the task before him.

Father—Harry was still not used to calling him that—had given him a list of books to take from the library and use in his studies. When asked about the reason for such a large number of books, he had merely shooed him out of the library, Harry's small arms struggling with the size of the load that not even a well cast Lightening charm could fix. Harry sighed again and looked desolately at the contents of the nearest book—*The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1*—and began to read.

He worked steadily through the lower level Hogwarts course books (including a few extra by the names of *Jinxes for the Jinxed* and *Confronting the Faceless*, both very interesting reads) before he began to get into the extracurricular subjects. He picked out the nearest book on Divination (*Death Omens: What to Do When You Know the Worst Is Coming* whose book cover icon resembled, strangely enough, Sirius when he was in his Animagus form) and eyed it with distaste. By the fact that it appeared brand new and hardly scuffed Harry figured it wasn't taken off the shelves often. Flipping open the book and reading the introductory chapter Harry snorted.

Small wonder, he thought viciously as he threw it aside nonchalantly. *It's full of rubbish. Why does he even have it anyways?*

Moving past the pile of neglected Divination texts he came upon something that looked very interesting to Harry: Arithmancy. He plucked it up out of the pile with interest and settled back among the pillows again.

It didn't take Harry long to grasp the concept behind the subject. He turned to his bedside table and rummaged in the drawers, finally

coming up with an eagle feather quill, parchment, and a bottle of ink that he had nipped from Father's desk in the library when he wasn't looking. He grinned mischievously as he unscrewed the top of the bottle, dipped the tip of the quill into its contents and smoothed the parchment over his knees, consulting the book in front of him.

"Let's see...Harry James Potter, that would be a...eight, plus...one, plus two nines, so eighteen...add seven for Harry..."

He worked in silence for awhile, only the scratching of the quill against the parchment and the steady rays of the sun moving across his floor marking the passage of time. At last he sat back and surveyed his work.

"Not bad," he said, smiling. He flipped to the designated page in the Arithmancy text before him. "Let's see, my full name adds up to five, which is also my personality number..." he glanced at the volume. "Fives... 'Five is the number of instability and imbalance, indicating change and uncertainty. Fives are drawn to many things at once but commit to none. They are adventurous, energetic and willing to take risks. They enjoy travel and meeting new people but may not stay in one place very long. Fives can be conceited, irresponsible, quick-tempered and impatient.' Well, that's me in a nutshell...Except for that last part, anyways, though patience isn't my strong point...My heart number is...seven... 'Perceptive, understanding, and bright, sevens enjoy hard work and challenges. They are often serious, scholarly, and interested in all things mysterious. Originality and imagination are more important than money and material possessions. Sevens can also be pessimistic, sarcastic, and insecure.' There's that insecure again...and..." Harry checked the worn parchment on which he did his calculations. "My life number is seven, too..." Satisfied with his achievement, he set aside his work for later scrutiny and began on the other subject that interested him: Care of Magical Creatures. He chose *Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland* to start with and settled back to enjoy his research.

By the time he was done reading the many texts on Care of Magical Creatures he felt rather sure that, should he be given a test on the subject now he'd pass it with flying colors. He grinned as he recalled

the very violent and intimidating pictures of different kinds of dragons from the first volume. That Hungarian Horntail had looked pretty wicked. *Maybe I should ask Father for a pet dragon*, he thought in amusement, stifling a giggle fit as he imagined the look on the Dark Lord's face should the subject ever come up. *That'd be fun. I doubt Nagini would appreciate it much.* A sudden image of Nagini hissing and spitting with rage over a small dragon curled up in her usual spot on his bed threatened to crack his composure. *Yeah, they wouldn't be pleased about that. Wonder if he'd actually do it, though?* There was a thought process to ponder. He shook his head and moved onto Advanced Transfiguration before he could be drawn in. He'd see to that later.

It was well into the night by the time Harry finished even a quarter of the books crowding the surface of his bed; Binky had dropped by earlier to deliver his dinner to him, and Nagini had come around to check up on him. Remembering his giggle fit from earlier, Harry told her in casual passing about the idea of him having a dragon for a pet; He'd really like one. Nagini, as expected, had hissed in disapproval right from the get-go but had allowed the excited young boy to show her pictures of the intimidating dragon species.

After Nagini had left Harry had begun practicing his magic. He had been training with Father for awhile now to learn to control it without a wand, and he felt he was beginning to get rather good at it; not only could he levitate the feather and that blasted heavy book with ease, but he could summon smaller things to him with minimal difficulty. Of course, Father didn't know about this; Harry had been working in secret, and hoped to surprise him with how far he had advanced. Harry smiled and with a flick of his wrist summoned the biggest and heaviest of the books towards him. It certainly did help him with these monstrous things.

Harry flipped through the pages of the book, *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charms* in disinterest before stashing it away and nicking the more recent ones—more precisely, the school books. Harry was going to practice.

Hitting upon the index of spells in the book, Harry examined it for a moment before nodding and setting it aside, standing and going to

bolt the door that led to the bathroom. Stepping back, he focused his magic to undoing the lock. "*Alohomora*," he intoned with a slight brush of the wrist, and after a split moment of waiting he heard the tell-tale click of the lock springing open. He grinned to himself as he sauntered smugly back over to his bed, intent on trying more spells. This magic thing was getting easier.

It was the following Monday that Harry was called into the practice room where he held most of his magic lessons. He had worn his normal attire, however this time with a dark blue battle robe over it. He had a feeling things might get a bit rough.

He was correct. Upon entering the towering chamber the first thing he noticed was that there was another in the room besides Father—and it wasn't Severus. Instead, a dark woman garbed in the customary Death Eater robes that he had so frequently seen on the Potion's Master stood to the right of Father's chair, off to the side of the room. Father smiled when he walked in.

"Ah, Harry," he said pleasantly as Harry came to stand before him, curiosity evident in his eyes as he paid an almost rude amount of attention to the unknown person in the room. She regarded him coolly from behind heavily lidded eyes. "Good to see you on time. I suppose you're curious as to who our guest is this lesson?" Father didn't give him a chance to continue before going on. "This will be one of your tutors from now on, and she is here to test you on your abilities. Harry, meet Bellatrix Lestrange; Bella, my son, Harry." Harry nodded and offered his hand for the woman to shake, which she took cautiously. Father smiled again. "She will be in charge of this lesson; I am here to watch. Begin when you are ready."

Bellatrix—or Bella, as Father called her, turned on her heel curtly and strode to the middle of the room, glancing over her shoulder to check if Harry was following; He was.

She spun to face him and her wand jumped to her hand, Harry having barely enough time to think before a jet of light came roaring towards him. Harry scrambled to remember the incantation for the shielding charm he had memorized the night before and recalled it just in time.

"Protego!" he shouted, flicking his wrist a little harder than necessary and his shield sprang to life, sending the curse ricocheting around the room. Harry leapt to the side as another curse, this time a red light that identified it as a Stunner came hurtling his way.

Good grief, she's fast, he thought frantically. He dare not spare a glance to see his Father's reaction, but he had a feeling the man thought this was funny. *This isn't amusing to me.*

After a time of alternating between dodging and shielding Harry finally saw his chance to get an offensive curse in. He cast his mind around to find the perfect spell and landed on one in particular. Harry sensed what suspiciously felt like a smirk flit across his face as he rolled out of the way of Bella's latest attack (this time the Impediment curse) and, bouncing back to his feet, brandished his hand.

"Serpensortia," he hissed, and a large, very dangerous looking venomous black snake burst into existence between the two combatants. It coiled in around itself and raised its body, swaying back and forth slightly as its hood flared out in warning; it was a king cobra.

"Disssarm her," Harry commanded the snake and, faster than lightning, the cobra slithered up to Bella and wrapped itself around her, her wand clattering to the floor. Harry, using this as an opportunity, struck out with his magic and tripped her, rendering Bella immobile. Harry summoned Bella's wand to him and turned to Father expectantly.

Father was watching the scene with a kind of fiendish glee, a cruel and wicked smile curving his mouth as his heir conjured a snake and sicked it on his most trusted follower. He began to clap slightly, with delight warring with pride for dominance on his features.

"Excellent, Harry. You're won." Father flicked his wrist and the king cobra squeezing the life out of Bella vanished. She climbed shakily to her feet and eyed the young boy guardedly.

Harry smiled at his father's praise and turned to continue his testing, feeling far more confident in himself than before.

Harry spent the rest of the day going through every spell he knew, pushing at his current limits and wading through unknown territory as she taught him new spells that he was expected to know by heart by the next lesson. Harry beamed and nodded in agreement to everything presented to him, his spirits still high from his earlier victory.

Harry passed every day in this manner, alternating between training with Bella and lessons with Father. It was the last Saturday before the new school term started that Harry had his next lesson with Severus.

Harry looked at the man that he had come to respect as a fine teacher and (dare he consider it?) a good friend. The man was pale, naturally, but at the moment he looked as if he hadn't seen the sun in years. His dark, gleaming eyes stood out in sharp contrast to the rest of his face, the oily hair that framed his features seeming even more lank and lifeless than before. If Harry could gamble he'd wager a guess that the man was rail thin under his robes. Severus noticed Harry's inspection of his person while in the midst of setting up for the lesson.

"It is simply pre-term stress. It will pass after the second week of school. Now, where's the homework I assigned you last lesson?"

They were to be brewing Shrinking Solution today. Harry got out his ingredients and began to prepare them for the potion. He glanced at Severus out of the corner of his eye, pretending to be consumed with his task of chopping the daisy roots required for the brewing. The Potions Master was leaning heavily against the countertop, rubbing at his temples in an almost obsessive fashion; Harry could only imagine the headache the man must have at the moment for him to be showing his discomfort so openly. Harry put aside his now neatly cut roots and began the arduous task of skinning the shrivelfigs. It looked as if he'd be making this one unsupervised.

For an unsupervised potion, it didn't look to bad, Harry noted, comparing the state of his finished concoction with the detailed description in the Potions tome resting on the counter by his side.

Severus had been called away to attend to matters at Hogwarts (“No doubt the Headmaster wishes to check how far I’ve come along with planning the class lessons,”) and left Harry to his own devices, though the boy didn’t mind. Without glancing to the shelf where the empty sample vials were kept, Harry wordlessly summoned a few to him and began to ladle the potion into them. Finishing with this task, he corked them and banished them gently to the cabinet where they would be safe until Severus came to examine them for his grade. Harry looked into his cauldron and, deciding he didn’t feel like cleaning it out at the moment, tried a charm he had come across two days ago when researching useful spells as homework from sessions with Bella.

“*Scourgify*.” All of the contents of the cauldron vanished, Harry noted approvingly. That would be one nifty spell. He banished the cauldron back to the rack of them near the sink and cleaned up his work area in silence.

Satisfied that it was done properly, Harry left the dungeons and made his back to his room, intent upon looking up more spells for him to use.

Chapter Eleven: Clash

“Welcome, to a new year at Hogwarts! As always, the Forbidden Forest is off limits, and Mr. Filch has once again asked me to remind you that magic is not allow in the halls, among a bushel of other things, which are listed on the door to his office! Now I can see that you are all starving, so do not let me detain you any further! Tuck in!” A loud round of cheers met this proclamation as the Great Hall suddenly exploded with the sound of clinking silverware and noisy students gossiping to each other.

Severus scowled and turned to his dinner, not feeling even remotely hungry at the moment. The Potions Master sensed an intense gaze come to rest on him, and didn't have to glance up to know it was Albus eying his lack of an appetite with displeasure. He grimaced and served himself a small helping of roast beef. No use irritating the man and end up being called to his office because he was “neglecting his health”. Severus poked at the meat on his plate for show and discreetly eyed the new students at every table. Not very many for Hufflepuff this year—thank Merlin—but unfortunately the number of new Gryffindors more than made up for that. Severus stabbed at the baked potato Pomona had cautiously prodded next to the rest of his meal (she didn't think he had seen her, but he had; it was kind of difficult to miss) vindictively, imagining each to have the face of the Gryffindors that particularly itched his nerves.

He let out a small puff of air in gratitude that he did not yet have to deal with those two little imps he had the misfortune to run into in the Apothecary. Merlin knows, as he had informed Albus in perfect seriousness that they would bring that annoyingly charmed roof of the castle crashing down around their ears. Severus was determined to stop their enrollment to the best of his ability. Those other two Weasleys were bad enough. He scowled as he turned to observe them.

The eldest of the two—William, if he remembered correctly, for he refused to associate any form of nickname with any Gryffindor, no matter how adept they are in his class—was currently scooping up a handful of string beans and slipping them down the back of a nearby

Prefect's shirt. The girl jumped up from the table screaming indistinguishably, oblivious to the attention she was drawing from her classmates. Severus watched on approvingly as his Slytherins surveyed this display in disgust. If any of them had the gull to try such a stunt Severus would have them serving detention with Filch or strung up from the ceiling of his office by their thumbs with the chains the man still keep in an out-of-the-way closet, legality aside. He would suffer no foolish behavior among his charges—they were brought up to be far better than that. Severus sniffed slightly in disdain and returned his attention to the plate still brimming with food in front of him. He had the eldest Weasley boy tomorrow and he did not fancy thinking any more on him than was absolutely necessary.

Severus watched neutrally as the fifth year Slytherin-Gryffindor double period class filed in, already taking note of who was absent and who wasn't. Much to his dissatisfaction, Weasley was present for the class.

So much for starting the year on a pleasant note, he thought crossly. The notion was doing wonders to worsen his mood, and as soon as the last meek student shuffled into the room he made a show of wandlessly closing it, being extra careful to make it slam with all force possible as it did so. He smirked sadistically as several of the more skittish Gryffindors jumped, nervous sweat already dotting their foreheads. Maybe this year wouldn't be so bad.

"I will not waste precious time 'beating around the bush' so I shall get straight to the point," Severus began in what could almost be called a pleasant tone. Half the class flinched in horror and it took all of his willpower not to laugh insanely. Fools. "This is your O.W.L.S. year, and because of that I expect you to do your absolute best, despite the fact that some of you have utterly...dismal...capabilities when working with potions." His eyes skirted to the worst students in the class—incidentally those who wore red and gold in particular—for emphasis. "Even so, many of you will find that your 'best' will fall far short of expectations, and the majority of you will not be returning next year...though to my greater pleasure or yours is unknown."

He decided to tone it up a bit—they weren't looking nearly as frightened as he would have liked. He dropped his voice to a menacing whisper that nonetheless echoed around the room as if it was shouted. "I will *not* tolerate *any* mishaps this year. There will not be a *single. Blown. Up. Cauldron. In. This. Room*, or the consequences will be **dire**. Do I make myself *clear*?" He ended, adding a slight hint of malevolence for effect. He absorbed the cowed expressions of the students in contentment.

Yes; perhaps this year won't be so bad after all.

Time passed without incident; Harry followed his training schedules as planned, reading the books assigned him and attending the dueling sessions set up between Bella and himself. It did not take him long to find that she loathed being called anything other than Bella or Bellatrix, and hated any sort of familiarity with children. As so, Harry had taken—much to Tom's vindictive delight—to coming up with as many "endearing" terms as he could to make her uncomfortable; he found it made her almost careless in battle, and took full advantage of it. His current name for her was "Aunt Bella", the one that seemed to irk her least but was nonetheless effective as to its purpose.

Severus continued on with his Potions lessons, every so often dropping by after classes or on the weekends to give Harry a quick study class in the art; it was the only time Severus got to spend any time at all with a child that didn't make him want to strangle them.

It was a little over a week later—Friday, September 12th, to be exact—that the first sign of trouble marred the peaceful outlook of life that held the wizarding world in its grasp.

Severus assigned his last class of the day their homework and snappily ushered them out of the classroom, slamming the doors after them and distractedly waving his wand to take care of anything that might have been out of place. He rushed through the door in the back of the room towards his office, teeth clenched in pain as he tightened his grip on his left forearm. He swept around the chamber at a record pace, throwing on his Death Eater robes and snatching his mask from its hiding place in his wardrobe before sweeping out

again, taking only enough time to cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself to stop any panic from spreading through the school at his attire. He passed by the brimming and noisy Great Hall and out onto the bare grounds of the castle, the last beams of light from the sun bathing everything different shades of red and orange. Severus sneered in disgust at the sight of Hagrid as he made his way, gardening supplies thrown carelessly over one shoulder, to the pumpkin patches that he knew the man was already tending to for Halloween. It took him not more than a few minutes to arrive at the apparating point (through sheer habit these days) and disappeared with a short burst of magic to meet his Master. It was about time a real raid held place.

Severus took his place in the circle of Death Eaters that filled the space of the Dark Lord's throne room, not even fidgeting when the large man beside him accidentally bumped his arm as he shifted from foot to foot. Severus scanned the dark shadows of the room for any sign of Harry, but left out a slight sigh or relief as he noted that the boy wasn't present. Severus did not wish for him to see this.

The Dark Lord himself sat regally in his throne, watching detachedly as his followers shuffled in their places around the room, nervous twitching overcoming them whenever his gaze happened to land among them. Severus bit back a snort; if they could not handle being in his presence then they should not have "signed up" for this in the first place.

He was snapped out of his thoughts as their Lord stood gracefully, all noise—if any—in the room vanishing instantly only to be replaced by fearful and respectful attention. Voldemort surveyed them carefully.

"My loyal followers," he began, slowly descending from the raised floor his 'throne' was placed on, "I have called you tonight for a purpose. As you are no doubt aware there has been little to no activity from our forces for quite some time. Why, you may ask? That is not for you to know. All you need to know is that I have summoned you to join in a blow against those bumbling fools who dare to oppose us." Voldemort reached level ground with his followers, but he still

seemed to tower over them all with the superior air about him. Severus listened raptly. "Tonight we shall deliver a simple strike, but one that will hit right to their cores. As you have more than likely guessed, I am talking about the Potters." A dangerously disturbed look crossed his pallid face for such a brief moment that Severus almost thought he had imagined it.

"Ah yes...the *Potters*..." the Dark Lord hissed, bringing his spidery fingers closer to his face as he narrowed his eyes at them. "Those who have been as much a thorn and blade to my side as Dumbledore himself." A collective shiver ran through the line of black-clad wizards, Severus included. It was never a good thing when his Master achieved such a look of malice. If Severus was one for praying—or liked the Potters even an ounce more than he did, which he didn't—then he would have been begging Merlin himself to do something to stop this. As it was he simply sat back on his heels unobtrusively, thoroughly enjoying the thought of those fools getting what was coming to them.

"Pureblood Potter and his Mudblood wife, and their twit of a boy...that they *dare* to believe is capable of destroying me! But what can we do, you may ask? Their home is very well protected, so there is little chance of attacking them directly..." Voldemort smiled in a twisted fashion. "But a little rat has told me another way to hit them...through Mudblood Potter's sister, and her family. We shall have a bit of mugglesporting tonight, my friends."

Severus slinked into the shade between the two practically identical muggle houses, accompanied by no other than Bellatrix Lestrange and the Dark Lord themselves. Severus covertly cast his eyes to where he knew the other teams of Death Eaters stood, waiting for the signal from their Lord that would give clearance for the attack. Severus felt adrenaline flow through his veins as the Dark Lord held up his wand and shot silver and green sparks high into the air, dimly illuminating the concrete streets of Privet Drive, Surrey and the black hulking shadows of the Death Eaters as they advanced upon the different homes in the area, leaving Number Four to Voldemort, Severus and Bella. The Dark Lord was already stalking off towards

the front of the house, intent upon his purpose and leaving the other two to hurry after him.

A single red blast from the Reductor Curse blew the front door of the tidy little house off its hinges, wooden splinters showering the front hall of the house. Serverus could vividly hear the same sounds coming from the other buildings on the streets. All down the road lights clicked on and confused shouting began to roar, only to turn into tortured screams as the muggle occupants stumbled upon their attackers.

Knowing there was little time until the Order and Aurors began to Apparate into the street, Voldemort gracefully entered the small home as if he himself lived there, ignoring the blinding lights that ticked on up the stairs and the heavy footsteps of feet pounding down the steps.

A fat, beefy man with very little neck, clad only in pajamas and a white wool robe, faded into sight at the base of the stairs, staring at the group of wizards uncomprehendingly until he spotted the wand that Bella was casually taking from the pocket of her robes. The man went white, and then an extraordinary shade of red.

"You...you—*freaks*! What do you think you're doing in my home? Leave now, before I call the police! I will not tolerate your kind breaking and entering here as if—" Here the man, more than likely Lily Potter's brother-in-law, was cut off, left to claw at his throat as his face went ashen, temporarily silenced from the spell the Dark Lord had cast upon him. A lighter, more flighty set of footsteps came down the stairs as the woman who was most likely the man's wife stopped next to him, thin hands flying to her mouth in horror and large eyes taking in the scene before her.

"Oh, my—*Vernon*! My dear sweet husband, what have you done to him you...you...*freaks*!" She shrieked as she began to sob, clutching at the rapidly purpling man next to her. She eyed the wands held in their hands and her gaze narrowed icily. "You...you're...you're just like *her*. Just like my *abomination* of a sister! Get out! Get *out*, I said! I won't have your kind loitering around here! Fix my Vernon and *leave*!" Voldemort's eyes narrowed on the ranting woman, deftly silencing her as well. He turned to Bella.

“Go upstairs. I believe these two pathetic excuses for muggles have a son. Take care of him.” Bella nodded, insane glee dancing in her eyes as she knocked the two of the way, practically skipping up the stairs to do as she was ordered. Voldemort now turned to Severus.

“Go and gather up the rest and have them begin transport back to base before the opposition begins to arrive. I will finish these two. Now go.” Severus didn’t need to be told twice. He spun on his heel, his voluminous black robes billowing out behind him as he left with just enough speed as to not be suspicious, all the while blocking out the sound of screams echoing from the house behind him as the Dark Lord lifted the charms and began his fun. Severus turned his attention to the chaos in the street.

Death Eaters were everywhere, many having dragged their prey out into the open air from the buildings—many burning—around them. Severus had just started to give his orders to return to base when a series of loud *pops* resounded around the street as Aurors and Order members arrived, many already brandishing their wands like swords and leaping into action before they had even finished apparating. Severus scowled and flicked his wand into his hand, charging forward cautiously. Perhaps, in all this chaos, he’d be lucky enough to curse one of those blasted Potters, or maybe even Lupin or Black...

Almost as soon as the battle began it stopped. Most of the muggles—dead by now, and those not quickly dying—littered the streets and the Death Eaters began to take quick haste, apparating back to the base or, if they couldn’t, using pre-prepared portkeys to reach safety. Severus was among the last to leave; the Dark Lord had already gone, his business finished. He retreated to the cover of a nearby alley and was halfway through Apparating away before a curse hit him, agony exploding in his shoulder from the Cutting Hex even as he was whisked away from the scene. He knew he’d have to go and get that checked by Pomfrey later, much as he might dislike the notion. For now, he had a group of Death Eaters, Voldemort, Albus and an irate Order to deal with, and none of them were a very pretty prospect.

Well, Severus thought venomously as he cast his frigid gaze over the gathered Order members around the table, he had been right on one

account; dealing with this lot wasn't a very pretty prospect at all. He had not so much as walked in the door to join the meeting before he had been jumped by a hysterical Lily, followed closely by Potter and his lapdog Black. Lupin had the good grace to stay away, choosing instead to hover in the background and watch the scene from afar. Black had already snatched his wand from him and Potter had him pinned to the ground, halfway through pronouncing the Cruciatus Curse before Albus, bless the old man, had swept into the room and had separated the two mad men from Severus with a flick of his wand. The Potions Master rose stiffly, brushing off and rearranging his robes—still the stoic black of a Death Eater—with as much dignity as he could muster before he stalked off the his chair which was, much to his displeasure, positioned next to Lupin's.

Oh well. At least he wasn't sitting next to one of those pathetic excuses for Aurors. Being jumped once was enough for the day, thank you very much. Severus was in the middle of scowling fiercely at the group of three across the table when Albus tapped the end of his wand sharply on the table, calling the attention of the Order to him. Severus sat up straighter and prepared himself for his performance.

And what a performance it was! Severus was not surprised when Albus saved his 'report' for last; he did it every time there was a raid and personally, Severus was thankful for it. It gave those hooligans less time to jump him.

Severus stood up coolly, a mask of indifference placed expertly on his face. He kept his eyes on Albus as he spoke, somehow managing to disregard the hissing of the Gryffindor fools across from him.

"The Dark Lord gave no warning of the raid taking place," he started. "I was finishing up and dismissing my last class for the day when the Mark began to burn. Following procedure I donned my robes and Apparated to the meeting point. Not even the top ranked Death Eaters knew it was going to happen." Severus could hear in the background the slightly mocking voice of Black 'Of course you wouldn't know, you're not in your Master's trust enough to know are you, you slimy snake? Thinking of chucking a school bus of muggle children to him to compensate?' Severus grit his jaw and continued as if he couldn't hear them.

“We were ordered to split up into separate teams, three to each—I was placed with the Dark Lord and one other. The Dark Lord took care of the two eldest of the Dursleys, the intended target for the attack, while the other Death Eater went upstairs to deal with their child. I was given the task of rounding up the rest of the Death Eaters when the Aurors began to arrive.” Severus sat down now, flinching slightly as he felt the oozing wound from the Cutting Hex throb in protest at the sudden movement. Albus nodded in understanding and turned to get any information the Order members might have been withholding. Severus secretly reached his hand up to his shoulder, touching the gash tenderly and fighting back a wince. Minerva—who was on his other side—turned to him in concern.

“Are you alright, Severus? You look hurt.” Severus tried to protest but would here none of it. She snatched his hand away from his shoulder sternly and inspected the injury. Severus looked away; slightly ashamed for reasons he couldn’t explain, just in time to hear Black boasting loudly,

“Yeah, I got one of them! Bloke was trying to apparate away when I nabbed him in the shoulder with a Cutting Hex.” The mutt and Potter began to laugh loudly and Severus bit back a swear word, barely managing to stop himself from grabbing up his wand and jinxing the man for his brainless candor.

“Blasted Black,” he hissed quietly between clenched teeth even as Minerva pulled away from her examination of his wound. She scowled at him and then at Black, having heard what the man had said. She sat back in her seat, sighing and rubbing her temples wearily.

“At this rate you two are going to kill each other before the war is over,” she said dryly, taking her hands away from her face. She shot him a severe look, and Severus had to remind himself, for the umpteenth time now, that he was no longer a student and she his teacher. “You will go and see Poppy the instant this meeting is over, understand? We don’t need you getting it infected because you’re too stubborn to get it checked.” Severus gave a slight, noncommittal grunt and leaned back in his chair, attempting to ease the tightness out of his shoulder. Minerva took this for agreement and turned away

to continue her previous conversation with Kettleburn, who was to her right. Severus caught Albus watching him with the usual twinkle in his eyes more bright than ever, and Severus had to bite back a sneer.

Why did he have to deal with these fools? *Oh, of course*, he reminded himself acidly, *you signed up for it*.

Severus wished he could hex someone, and that someone was a promising prospect by the name of Black. He hid a smirk and slid his wand up his sleeve as the wizards around the table stood, saying their goodbyes to each other as they left. Severus followed Black distantly through the door and towards the Front Hall. Perhaps some payback for that Cutting Hex was in order; he could go visit Poppy afterwards. The woman need never know—neither of them, really, his thoughts going to Minerva—that he hadn't gone directly to the nurse with his injury. After all, vengeance was of far more importance.

Chapter Twelve: Halloween and Quidditch

Harry sighed slightly as he picked up the intricately designed black robe from his bedspread and tugged it on over his crisp white dress shirt, pulling a little at the folds as it settled. He plopped down onto the plush carpet and put on his favorite pair of dragon hide boots—thankfully not scuffed badly enough to be inappropriate—and drew ebony fingerless leather gloves over his small hands. Propping his arms behind him, he hauled himself off the floor and towards the bathroom.

Once inside, he started up the water with a twist of the crystal faucets, splashing a small amount of water onto his face and drying it with a flick of his wrist. Harry pulled his hair, now shoulder length, back with one hand and with the other carefully opened the drawer below the marble sink, picking through the contents until he happened upon a small band. The boy extracted the band from the drawer, forcing it shut with a bit more force than intended with his hip as he tied his hair back low to his neck. He tucked his family locket down his shirt and stood back, inspecting himself.

He had asked a month or so ago if he could, perhaps, fix his vision—it was a horrible handicap in battle, as shown when Bella had gotten tired of him and had summoned his glasses to her. Being without them had taken some getting used to, but as he closely looked over his appearance he had to admit to himself that it also made him look better. A small smirk slid across his face as he spun on his heel, strolling back into his room and snatching his silk dress cloak off the back of a nearby armchair as he went and swirling it around his shoulders, leaving it to drape over him. Last he grabbed a shiny, onyx feathered mask off of his bedside table and placed it over his young features, obscuring everything but his eyes, chin and mouth. After all, he had to eat, didn't he?

Harry spared one last glance into the tall silver mirror on the wall next to the door before he swept out, noting in delight that it billowed behind him slightly, just as it did with Father and Severus. Maybe he was finally getting the hang of this “Dark Heir” gig.

He marched silently down the corridor towards the ballroom, gaily paying attention to the black, silver and orange glow added to the torches as he did so.

Arriving at the doors of the ballroom, he arranged his robes and checked to make sure his mask was still in place one last time before pushing the doors open convincingly, intent upon making a grand entrance.

The ballroom was lit with lanterns that were patterned after the torches in the hallway, silver and grotesquely twisted candelabras hovering eerily in the air, glowing slightly with a radiant light. Elegant oak tables were set up around the edges of the room, each having its own lantern floating above it and plates waiting for orders. Harry could barely make out the soft hums of classical music playing in the background, and Harry glanced around sneakily but could not pinpoint where it came from.

And lastly, the people. Harry had never seen so many people in one place, not even in his trips to Diagon Alley. All of them were dressed in stylish and expensive robes, differing in color in design from the plain black to the almost sickeningly vibrant in a way that reminded him of Professor Dumbledore—Harry could have sworn that someone had dressed up as a peacock, probably as a joke. He shook his head and craned his neck, looking around to find anyone he knew, though the list was short. He finally spotted Bella off to the side of the chamber, standing alone and glaring at anyone who dared to so much as glance at her; two men he didn't recognize stood in close proximity to her, engaged in a robust debate that included an incredible amount of arm waving. As Harry slipped through the crowd towards them he couldn't help but wonder how it was that Bella hadn't killed them. He finally broke through the mass and stood before his tutor, looking up at her as he waited for her acknowledgement.

It was a few moments, but when she did finally take note of him she gazed at him coldly with half-lidded eyes. To Harry she looked half-asleep.

“Have you seen Father, or maybe Severus?” He asked, shuffling from foot to foot as he snuck an uncertain glance at the two males nearby, who seemed to have detected his presence. They turned to him almost as one, curiosity but wariness shining from their dark eyes. The colder of the two came to stand next to Bella, watching him just as icily as the woman beside him.

“Ah, so this is the Dark Lord’s heir?” he asked, short and to the point. Bella didn’t even glance up at him, just continued to stare at Harry with an unnervingly keen gaze. Harry fought the overwhelming urge to scuffle his feet at the awkwardness of the situation.

Thankfully a rescue came swiftly. The other of the two, seeming much friendlier than his companions, bounded up to Harry, grinning an almost insane smile down at him. “So you’re the Heir? Pleased to meet you! Oh,” he added, waving his hands widely with half-hearted exasperation towards the other two. “Don’t mind Bella and Rodolph, they’re a couple of ice cubes.” ‘Rodolph’ turned to glare at him venomously, but had not even opened his mouth to retort before Bella cut in.

“That is enough, the both of you, this isn’t school and you aren’t schoolboys. Rodolphus and I” she explained, turning to Harry, who had been watching the exchange almost as if it were a tennis match, “apologize. We are not fond of celebrations.” Rodolphus merely turned away, disinterested in the conversation. Harry sheepishly scratched at the back of his neck.

“Its, er, no problem, Bella,” he replied, but not quite sure when this discussion got off topic, “but I really do need to know where Father is. He wished to speak to me.” Bella examined him before nodding, signaling to the friendlier man.

“Fine. Rabastan will take you to him.” Rabastan turned to her with false horror marring his face. Bella rolled her eyes and pushed him towards Harry. “Go. You are really beginning to annoy me and I do not wish to be bothered tonight.” Rabastan had the nerve to stick his tongue out at her before seizing the stunned boy by the robes and towed the both of them out of there before Bella decided on what curse to use.

Once a safe distance away from her, Rabastan stopped and loosened his grip on Harry, panting slightly and grinning cockily over his shoulder.

"I think we lost her," he explained, his expression never faltering. Harry couldn't help but laugh a bit, reminded of those twins he had run into a lifetime ago. It was good to meet someone who could laugh at something other than another's misfortune.

Rabastan rocked back on his heels, locking his hands behind his back as he cast his gaze around the crowd. "So you're looking for the Dark Lord? Don't think he's come in yet. Doesn't like crowds, I think." Rabastan smiled down at Harry and Harry smiled back. "Want to grab something to eat?" The boy nodded enthusiastically and they soon found themselves seated at a table for two, ordering their food from the magicked menus and watching as the meals popped into existence upon the plates in front of them. Harry carefully took off his mask and dug into his food, not having eaten since lunch. Rabastan stopped shoveling his own food down his throat and surveyed him in amusement.

"Hungry, are you?" Harry lifted his head from his dish, beaming at the man across from him.

After the food was cleared away by an invisible force Harry sat back in his seat, happily patting his stomach and looked up to see Rabastan doing the same.

"Nothing quite like Halloween food, eh?" he asked, propping his spoon upside down and making it spin in a furious way with a flick of his wand. Harry, having nothing to say, glanced back towards Rodolphus and Bella, who appeared not to have moved since they had left the two standing there. Harry frowned slightly in curiosity before turning to the man across from him.

"Are they married?" Harry asked suddenly, berating himself silently for being so blunt. Rabastan shot up straight in his seat, surprised out of his simple task by the question.

"Who, Rodolph and Bella?" Harry nodded and the man resumed his task, boredom overcoming his features once again. "Yeah, they're

married. Been married for some time. Never thought I'd meet another pair quite like them, and true to form I haven't." Rabastan peered at him curiously. "So, how do you know Bell, anyhow?"

"She's my tutor. Father assigned her to dueling with me for practice." Rabastan whistled low, sending an envious look towards his sister-in-law.

"No wonder she's rarely at home. Off teaching the boss man's son himself." He grinned rakishly as he raised a glass of water to his lips. "Wonder what my brother dear would say if he knew?" Harry stared at him in shock, not daring to spare a look at the couple across the room.

"Are you serious? He doesn't even know what she's been doing? Good Merlin, she could have been...I don't know, sleeping with Severus, for all he knew!" Rabastan choked, spitting a mouthful of water over the crisp black tablecloth. He rubbed his neck, wincing in disgust.

"Bella? And Severus? Are you mad?" he rasped hysterically, slamming his fist into his chest in an attempt to get air into his abused lungs. "Never *ever* say something like that again, especially where she can hear you. She'll tear you to pieces, Heir or not, just like *that*." He performed a series of violent gestures in the air, "Got it?"

Harry paled, gulping slightly. "Uh yeah, I'll uh, remember that." He stammered, gripping the edges of his seat tightly. He didn't know doing something like that was humanly *possible*—but then again, this was Bella they were talking about, he reminded himself, grimacing slightly. The woman was a good teacher to be sure, but she was insane, and he was certain that she had done much worse than Rabastan had just implied.

Harry was snapped out of his reverie by a sharp, commanding tone of voice cutting through the fog of his thoughts.

"Uncle Rabastan! There you are! Father has been wishing to speak with you about something or other." Harry turned to look at the owner of the voice. Medium build, pale skin, gray eyes, and...*white-blond hair*? What in the world?

Rabastan waved his hand leisurely, heaving himself to his feet. "Might as well see what the old man wants," he muttered caustically, not sparing a glance at the two boys as he left. Harry watched him go before turning to the other boy, who was watching him as well. The boy sneered slightly.

"And who are you? I haven't seen you before. New blood?" he asked rudely, pointing his sharp nose high into the air. Harry thought it made him look funny but made no comment, instead choosing to cross his small arms and lean back in his seat, regarding the boy with a cool manner.

"It is polite to introduce yourself before addressing someone." Harry pronounced, scoffing slightly as the other adopted an indignant look.

"You can't speak to me like that! I am Draco Malfoy, and my father is Lucius Malfoy!" Harry rolled his eyes.

"Never heard of him," he answered, knowing who the man was and knowing that this would rile the boy up, but was too annoyed to care. Draco went red.

"*Never heard of him?* He is only the Dark Lord's right hand man! It is impossible to have never heard of him. How low are you on the rung, anyways? You shouldn't even be here." Harry's eyes hardened into chips of ice.

"You know, it really makes me wonder if your father is the Dark Lord's 'right hand man' or not if his own heir doesn't know who the man is." Draco stared at him uncomprehendingly. Harry sighed and slid off his chair, setting off in search of Father since Rabastan never got the chance to guide him. He was annoyed to find Draco dogging at his heels.

"What do you mean? Are you saying that *you're* the Dark Lord's heir? Impossible! Prove it." The boy challenged, snagging Harry by the sleeve and spinning him around the face him. Harry, far too impatient with this child to argue, simply pulled out the Slytherin locket hidden underneath his shirt for the blond to see. The boy gaped at it until Harry put it back, now walking at full speed in the hopes of getting

away from the pest; but alas, Draco just pursued him more determinedly than before.

“Wait! I believe you, but why aren’t you with the rest of us?” Harry stopped and turned to the boy, raising one aggravated eyebrow.

“Others’? You mean there are more of you?” he snapped, his patience at an end. Either the boy didn’t notice his abruptness or chose to ignore it, for he went on.

“Of course. There’s a group of us, and we were planning to play a game of Quidditch out on the lawn before Father sent me to find Uncle Rabastan. You *do* play Quidditch, don’t you?” Draco asked suddenly, eying Harry’s build with an almost professional gaze. Harry grunted.

“I would have an answer to that if I knew how to play it.” Harry sniped. True, he did know what Quidditch was and what the rules are, but he had not even so much as ridden a broom before. Draco was staring at him as if he had suddenly Transfigured himself wandlessly into some sort of two-headed hippogriff.

“You’ve...never played...Quidditch?” he asked, astonished. Harry snorted and spun on his heel, intent upon his own task until he found himself being tugged in the opposite direction, towards the Entrance Hall. “We have to fix this, so why don’t you come and play with the rest of us? After all, we can’t have you not knowing how to play Quidditch.” Harry buried his head into his hands, groaning softly. Today just wasn’t his day.

Draco finally stopped his march out on the lawns of the keep, the sun starting to sink down below the skyline of the trees that obscured the forest. A small group of children their age were standing out there waiting, many of them with brooms resting over their shoulders. Draco stopped in front of them and let go of Harry. Harry, affronted, busied himself indignantly with adjusting his ruffled robes, only looking up at the group staring at him in bewilderment once he was finished. Harry stood there stiffly, allowing them to examine him as Draco explained who he was and that he had yet to play a game of Quidditch. Many of the group stared at him in shock and awe, not

bothering to hide their surprise. Harry crossed his arms over his chest defensively, refusing to back down now that he was involved.

“So,” Draco finished, accepting his broom from a nearby girl who tried to attach herself to his arm when he did. He shook her off, disregarding her offended expression as he did so. “are we going to play or what?” Half the group shouted affirmation, bouncing off to the temporary Quidditch pitch that had been set up for just that purpose. Harry was left staring after them with one other boy, whose slanted eyes scrutinized him carefully before handing him the broom he was holding. Harry stared at him in confusion, trying not to be intimidated by the boy’s absurd height.

“Take it,” he said shortly, shoving the broom into Harry’s hands before he set off after the others, hands stuffed into the pockets of his robes. Harry was rooted there for a moment before he ran after him, catching up to him quickly.

“I can’t take this, it’s your broom,” Harry objected. The black boy spared him a narrow glance before turning back front, shrugging slightly.

“I don’t play Quidditch. Father wanted me to, but I was never into it. I’m not very good, either.” He explained, speeding up slightly as they neared closer to the retreating back ahead of them. Harry made a sound of frustration in the back of his throat, turning away from the boy. His dark companion gave an eerie chuckle.

“I like you. Blaise Zabini.” He offered, casually giving Harry a hand he had dug out from the folds of his robes. Harry awkwardly shook it, nodding in acknowledgement.

“Harry.” Blaise raised an eyebrow at the missing surname but said nothing as they finally caught up to the tail end of the gang as they reached the Quidditch pitch. Harry gaped.

Six fifty-foot tall hoops stood on opposite sides of the field, gleaming slightly in the slowly fading sunlight. The ground was shaven smooth, and Harry sprung a little on the spot, confirming the placement of cushioning charms on the ground. He raised his hand to shade his eyes as he assessed the arena, noting how far apart the hoops were

from each other. Draco, at the front of the group, was already dividing up the teams.

“Alright, on my team there’ll be me, Pansy and Greg. On the other will be Harry, Theo and Vincent.” He explained as the two teams separated down the middle. “Decide amongst yourselves what positions you will play.” He said shortly before retreating to his own team’s huddled forms. Harry turned to the two boys he was left with; Blaise had wandered off to find a seat somewhere on the grass.

The stringy boy—Theo, if he remembered, turned to Harry. “I’ll be Chaser, it’s the spot I’m best at.” He said simply. “Vincent should be the Keeper because he’s big and bulky, so it’ll be easier for him. You should be Seeker, you’re small and you’ll be fast on a broom.” Harry had nothing to say and no expertise in the matter so he just nodded, recalling everything he knew about Seekers. Yes, they were the ones who were supposed to be catching that small little gold ball thing—the Snatch? Snitch? Yes, something like that—and ending the game. Draco dug into his pocket and extracted a magically shrunk Quaffle and the Snitch. He returned the Quaffle to its normal size and set the Snitch free. Harry watched as it flitted about at incredible speeds, and was suddenly very, very thankful that he had his sight improved.

Harry mounted his broom on the signal, his nerves growing more and more as the time for the game to start drew closer. In desperation, he glanced at Blaise, who had found a soft patch of ground to settle down on not too far away. The boy gave him a brief thumbs up and Harry felt slightly better.

Slightly. Pansy and Theo shot into the air, tossing the Quaffle back and forth between each other for warm ups as the other players took their positions around the field. Harry snuck a glance at Draco, who was playing Seeker on the opposite team, seeing that he was still on the ground and watching Harry intently, waiting for him to make his first move. Harry scowled. He’d let Draco move first; he wasn’t about to make a fool out of himself.

Two blurs rocketing past in the air above him drew his attention; the game had begun.

Draco kicked off from the ground, spiraling into the sky. Harry gulped and sealed his eyes shut as tightly as he could, gripping the handle of the broom in a crushing embrace as he drew a deep breath.

He kicked off.

The moment his feet left the ground and he felt the wind rush past Harry felt an amazing feeling pass through him. He felt free.

Harry grinned, doing lazy circles as he climbed higher into the air, his fear of falling having been left on the earth far below him. He finally opened his eyes, smile growing wider as he looked around at Draco, who was a little higher than he was staring at him incredulously. Harry dived about five feet before pulling up again, spiraling in wide arcs around the field with intense swiftness before he shook himself out of it. He had a Snitch to catch, after all.

Harry squinted his eyes, gaze scouring the playing field for any sign of glinting gold in the vanishing sun. Not seeing anything, he absently began to watch the Chasers at work, weaving in and out around each other as best they could. Studying them, Harry wasn't surprised to see that Theo had been telling the truth. He was a good Chaser, and poor Pansy was struggling to keep up with him, much less actually beat him. Harry knew that if they kept that up the only chance Draco's team had was if the blond caught the Snitch, and Harry was going to make sure that it didn't happen. He stopped his lazy hovering and began to circle the pitch again, looking all the more sharply for any sign of the small gold ball he was supposed to catch.

Harry decided ten minutes later that this was getting boring. They had been at this for some time now, and he had yet to catch any sight of the Snitch. He was about to start observing the Chasers going at it again before he saw something gleaming dart out of sight on the opposite side of the field. Harry's eyes widened, thinking that it couldn't possibly be what he had thought it had been, until it flashed into vision again, and indeed it was: the Snitch.

Harry shot towards it with as much force as he could, racing towards the target that was now flitting about the opponents' goal posts. Harry lay flatter on his broom, hair whipped back away from his face. He

could hear the swishing of Draco's robes blowing wildly in the wind, closing in behind him on his superior broom. He grimaced and urged the broom to go faster. He would not lose this game!

Harry performed a tight-pin turn around the goal post, causing Greg to shriek like a girl as he seared past, nearly cuffing the boy on the ears with his foot as he did so. Draco was now almost even with him, not perturbed in the least by the difficult maneuvers Harry was pulling in an attempt to shake him. The Snitch chose that moment to fall into a vertical dive; Harry growled in frustration and chased after it, plummeting down towards the earth with such velocity that Harry felt his ears pop. He could distantly hear the sounds of hysterical screaming from someone who sounded uncannily like Pansy, but Harry took no note of it as all his attention zoned in on his objective, eyes not even seeing the ground as it dragged nearer to him.

Closer and closer the earth became, and as Harry reached out a hand, struggling to catch the small ball Draco pulled out of the dive behind him, pale from fear of pitching headfirst into the grass, despite the cushioning charm.

Fifteen feet, ten feet, five feet—the sea of green below came up to meet him as the Snitch and he leveled out, the toes of his boots brushing over the vegetation even as he snagged the harassed globe in the palm of his leather glove. Harry's vision cleared the moment he felt the cool metal touch his skin, and he nearly fell neck first off of the broom as he realized how close he had come to crashing. He jerked back on the handle and the broom slowed down just enough for him to dismount. He fell scrambling to the steady, solid mass of rock beneath him and it took all of his willpower not to collapse to his knees. He shakily straightened up, watching as the rest of the players descended from the air and came to rest near him; they all stared.

It was Theo who broke the silence. Quaffle in hand as he landed next to Harry, he juggled it from hand to hand before stating in an unbelievably cavalier manner, "Looks like we won. Good on ya, Harry, mate."

That snapped the others out of it. Vincent grinned stupidly as he realized they were victorious and sidled up to Greg, slapping him in

the shoulder roughly in consolation for their loss. Greg grunted and pushed him, and they were soon rolling around on the ground in an all-out mock fist fight. Draco said nothing, not even when Pansy attached herself to his sleeve like a leech, and didn't look at Harry as he spoke.

"Congratulations. You're not bad...for a beginner." He offered stiffly. Harry smiled thinly, accepting the slim compliment with one of his own.

"And you're not half bad yourself, Draco." Draco nodded stiffly before leaving, dragging Pansy after him and leaving Greg and Vincent to their own devices. Only Theo, Blaise, Harry and the wrestling duo were left.

Theo turned to Harry, grinning slightly. "Yeah, mate. You're not too bad. I'll invite you over to my place one of these days so you can play on my Quidditch pitch—next time with Bludgers, playing the real way. Bye." He waved and raced after Draco and Pansy, Quaffle still tucked under one arm.

Harry felt someone come to stand near him and looked up at Blaise. The boy smiled at him encouragingly.

"Nicely done. Give it another try or so and you might consider going professional." The smile seemed a bit strained, and Harry nodded in acknowledgement, understanding that praise and humor from this boy was rare. Harry handed Blaise his broom and shook his hand again, watching the boy leave the field. By this time Vincent and Greg had stopped rough housing and had already gone back to the keep. Harry spared a glance towards the Quidditch pitch, smiling, before hurrying after Blaise. He was hungry and he'd like to learn more about his Father's followers from Rabastan before the day was up and fill up on candy. After all, Halloween only came once a year.

Chapter Thirteen: Loss

4 Years Later

A much taller Harry bounded down the steps of the Entrance Hall in a rush, determined to get outside and to the temporary Quidditch Pitch as soon as possible. Draco, Blaise and Theo were waiting for him out on the front lawn for their annual pick-up Quidditch match, in honor of his birthday—his tenth, in fact.

A large grin spread across his face as he raced across the green summery lawns of the keep. It had been four years to the dot that he had come to live with his rightful family, here in the Dark Lord Voldemort's keep. In the time he spent there he had many experiences—some good, some bad. Harry scowled as he recalled that particularly nasty day when Aunt Bella had gotten sick of him dancing around her curses and had decided to tackle him to the ground and pin him there instead. The old gal had softened towards him a bit since he had first met her, but she was still the unyielding block of frost and whiplash that she had been upon their first encounter.

His 'uncles' hadn't changed much, either. Much to Uncle Rodolph's chagrin Harry had begun using the (entirely) inappropriate nickname christened him by his younger brother, Rabastan. Harry smiled in amusement at the thought of the older man. There had been numerous times when Harry had gotten down over the years, and Harry had been grateful that Uncle Rabastan—or Uncle Stan, as he preferred—had always been there to pick him up again. Harry remembered vividly the time he had first boldly asked the Death Eater if he could call him his uncle. The man had burst into tears and hugged him so tightly Harry was sure his airways would be permanently damaged. In many ways, Uncle Stan reminded him of Sirius.

Nagini had become quite scarce over the past few months though. He rarely even talked to her anymore, and he longed sorrowfully

sometimes for the nights where she would wind herself about him in a hug and hiss reassurances that she would take care of him. Nagini was the mother he had never had, and it bothered him that she was so often gone from the home to take care of business for Father.

And Father. Who could forget him? That devious snake was always coming up with the most creative ways to make sure Harry didn't skimp out on his lessons—or his weekly duels with Bella and himself. Harry scowled slightly. Like he would *dare* skip class anyways. He was a Slytherin and had a healthy sense of self-preservation, thank you very much.

Harry was snapped out of his wistful reverie when he came upon the Quidditch field. This place brought back memories, too. He had met his best friends here, and first learned to play the sport he loved. He wandered over to the small hut resting beside one of the fifty-foot goal posts, opening the door and extracting his beloved Nimbus Two Thousand. He chuckled slightly as he ran his hands over it, looking for any cracks in the wood or bent twigs. He had been made to beg and plead—even go so far as to throw away his dignity and toss himself at Father's heels, being dragged along the carpet by the stubborn man as he wailed on about how meaningless his life would be without it—to get it. He smiled and closed the door to the shed, shouldering his precious possession and setting off to meet his friends, who were standing in the middle of the pitch waiting for him to arrive.

Draco turned around to look at him as he approached, arms crossed over his chest proudly and nose high in the air as it always was.

"You're *late*, Harry. You should know better." Harry rolled his eyes, knowing from experience that this was Draco's way of giving him a playful hello.

"Oh, like you haven't been late before? You weren't on time for our last meeting because you were too busy snogging that Pansy girl in a broom closet." It was a well-known fact that anything to do with Pansy Parkinson disgusted Draco, and he showed his dislike for the mention of the girl with a curled lip and scrunched nose.

“Eeww! I would never associate with her. She’s nauseating.” He sulked, huffing in indignation. Harry glanced around the blonde’s exaggeratedly affronted figure to see Theo standing behind him, making mouth movements with his hands and fake-kissing an invisible figure. Harry bit his lip trying not to laugh at the sight. Draco eyed him beadily before swiftly spinning on his heel, confronting the guilty party.

Harry shook his head as the two began to argue heatedly, turning to the last of the group. Blaise grinned at him slightly, rolling his eyes heavenward and sweeping an exasperated gesture towards the squabbling pair. Harry responded with his own sign—a slap to the forehead—and they both beamed in amusement. They had long since created this sort of sign language to use whenever the other two were being idiots. Blaise strolled up to Harry, extending his hand for the boy to shake.

“Good to see you, Harry.” He said simply as Harry shook his hand in greeting. Harry smiled lopsidedly.

“Good to see you, too, Blaise. Haven’t seen you lot in forever.” He answered, stuffing a hand into the pockets of his robes and adjusting the broom across his shoulder with another. “How have you been?”

Blaise waved his hand dismissively. “Oh, this and that,” he responded vaguely. Glancing over at Draco and Theo, who had yet to acknowledge their presence, he leaned in, bringing his hand up to cup around his mouth secretively. Harry tilted forward, mischievous glee dancing in his eyes. “Just between you and me,” he muttered, glancing over at the two again, “I...heard...that Theo spent an *entire week* over at Draco’s place and they only fought *twice*.” Harry sat back on his heels, reeling with shock.

“No way.” He said, disbelieving. “You’re pulling my leg. That’s not possible.” Blaise shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

“That’s just what I heard,” he said distantly. Blaise snuck a glance at the dumbstruck Harry. “It might be a good idea to shut your mouth; I hear it attracts flies.” Harry’s jaw shut with a click of his teeth and he glared at his friend in mock offense.

“Really, now! You should know better than to say such things to me! After all, I’m the birthday boy, remember?” Blaise scoffed but said nothing, turning on the balls of his feet and moving a distance away before mounting his broom. Harry huffed in frustration at being ignored before hopping on his own broom, shouting at Theo and Draco as he did so. “Hey, you two! Get your arses on those brooms and get into the air already! We’re not going to wait on you!” Draco and Theo both turned to glare at Harry for daring to interrupt them, but Harry had already shot off into the sky to start the Quidditch game. They both moped but followed him. Harry couldn’t help but grin at them from his spot high in the air. They really should be enjoying today; after all, it was so rare for them to be allowed over to spend time with him, and Quidditch was something they all loved with a passion. It was only right that they should start the day with a two-on-two Quidditch match before they started to jump down one another’s throats.

It was much later in the day that Harry found himself sluggishly shuffling off to the dining hall with his friends in tow. They had already unwrapped his presents, eaten the birthday cake, played five more games of Quidditch and taken the Death Eater assigned to watch them for a whirlwind game of tag hide-and-go-seek, and now they were off to dinner. Dinner was, traditionally, the last event of the day and afterwards his companions would have to leave until next year’s party, and Harry wanted to postpone that moment as long as possible.

Theo caught sight of Harry’s brooding expression and thwacked him heartily on the shoulder, grinning so widely that it could only be false. “Cheer up Harry, it’s not the end of the world!” he said, glaring at the other two to help him out. Draco just turned his head to the side, ignoring him and Blaise was staring off to some unseen spot in front of them with a blank look on his face, seemingly unable to hear them. Theo sighed and threw his hands into the air, giving up. It was like this every year and it was really starting to drag on him. He cast his mind around for any way to lift the sad atmosphere that had fallen heavily around them and with a stroke of memory landed on one. “Hey Harry! I just remembered! I heard old Barty and Pansy’s dad talking about how well some mission went, and that snake of yours—

Nagini?—came back today. Aren't you happy?" Theo waited anxiously, hoping to see Harry brighten up at the news.

And Harry did brighten up. Forgetting his morose mood, he turned his head to the side and grinned at the relieved Theo. "Wicked. I haven't seen her in forever." Theo smiled back at him, and the gloom seemed to disappear as they started up a debate over the possible odds of having certain desserts at the dinner; Draco and Blaise stayed silent except for occasionally throwing in their opinion and starting up a heated argument just for the sake of it.

Far too soon for the group's liking they found themselves in the dining hall, seating themselves around the long wooden table as the first course of the night's dinner sprung into existence upon the surface of the table. Harry dug into his own food, Blaise to his left, Theo to his right and Draco on the opposite side of the table scrunched in between his parents. Only his friends' families, certain Death Eaters (like Bella, for example) and Harry himself ever attended these dinners. His father never came, and when Harry once asked why he had passed it off as 'disliking to eat in front of others'. Harry thought the paranoia was silly and unnecessary, but had never said so aloud, settling instead for spending the evening after the meal pestering him.

The only sounds in the entire room were the clinking of silverware and the low murmurs of occasional conversations between the adults. Theo, fed up with the silence, decided it would be a good idea to chuck a small portion of mashed potatoes into Draco's hair, causing an all-out riot and miniature food fight that threatened to bring the roof down with its intensity until Draco's father sharply reprimanded them. Both boys sunk low in the seats, meekly returning to their food and refusing to look up at each other. Silence reigned again for a short period of time in which Harry felt he'd go mad from the lack of sound.

Unfortunately he did not have to put up with it for long. Right as Harry was passing a plate of pork chops to Blaise a deafeningly shrill alarm went off somewhere in the keep, echoing off the stone walls and making it ten times louder than it was. Harry leapt from his seat, the dish forgotten as it crashed to the ground with a mighty clatter. All of the Death Eaters around the table were already on their feet, wands

in hand and placing masks that Harry did not even know they had been carrying over their features as they filed out of the room. Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned around to see Binky the house elf staring at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“Binky?” he asked in shock and disbelief. He hadn’t seen her in ages! What was she doing here now of all times? “What’s going on here?”

Binky shook her head vigorously, ears flopping back and forth wildly as she did so. “There is no time, Young Master Harry, sir! Binky is told to take Young Masters up to Young Master Harry’s room right away, sir!” She stared at him in wide eyes, willing him to understand her task.

Harry, although still thoroughly confused, turned to the others. “You heard her. Quick!” Theo and Blaise scrambled towards the door as Binky departed in a hurried fashion, leaving Draco to stand there sneering.

“Take orders from a *house elf*? Are you mad, Harry? I will not—” But Harry didn’t have the patience to put up with him at the moment. He seized Draco by the robes and hauled him out of the room, ignoring his howls of protest as he dragged him up the stairs after the others. Something bad was happening and there was no time to be a prat, he told the blonde when they finally caught up to Binky, Theo and Blaise. Draco simply stayed silent, staring at the ground.

Binky ushered the four of them inside, bolting the door as she left.

“This is for your own good, Young Masters! Master has ordered Binky to keep you from harm!” Her shrill voice echoed, growing fainter and fainter as she took off at a run down the hallway. The room was quiet and Harry rushed to the window. What he saw made all the color in his face drain, leaving his complexion pure white.

There was a violent battle being waged down on the lawns of the keep—where he and his friends had been not forty-five minutes ago. Harry felt the others crowd around behind him, peering over his shoulders in shock at the sight.

The grounds were unrecognizable. There were corpses littering the ground, quite a few of them the tell-tale black of a Death Eater and still others garbed in a uniform Harry identified immediately from his days at the Potter Manor—Auror robes. Harry clutched a hand to his chest, willing himself to breathe. Had they been found out?

They watched the battle for a few minutes, and Harry noted with despair that their side was vastly outnumbered. Only the Death Eaters from the party and the few that had been stationed around various points of the keep were out there in the fray, and it was quickly becoming obvious. As he watched darkly-clad wizard after wizard being struck down, Harry couldn't help but wonder sickly just how many people he knew were dying out there while he sat up here in the security of his chambers, safe, for the moment, from the torrential onslaught of their attackers outside.

Harry heard a gasp and turned to see Draco, even paler than usual and pointing to the front gates of the keep. Harry turned to look and couldn't help but gasp in horror himself.

The gates were down. Huge, moving masses of the Aurors spilled into the front courtyard, killing any opposition that happened to be in the way. Harry backed away from the sight, sweaty, shaking hands clenched into fists near his stomach as he struggled not to vomit. Theo already had, coming out of the bathroom with a drawn, distressed face. Draco was sitting on the floor and leaning against the window frame, his face held tightly in his hands and his knees tucked feebly against his chest as he struggled to breathe. Harry felt a brief flash of sympathy for the boy; his parents had been out there fighting and had, more than likely, been killed already or were about to be.

Harry slammed his eyes shut and took a deep, calming gulp of air before opening his eyes again, features hardening.

"We have to get out of here," he said quietly, already knowing what the general response would be. Theo stared at him as if he were mad.

"Are you off your rocker? Did you see how many of them were out there? We'd never make it to the next floor, never mind get out of the keep in one piece!" he shouted, stomping on the ground in denial.

“We’ll die just as quickly if we stay here! At least if we move we have a chance at surviving.” Theo glared at him, red in the face.

“Oh, and then what? Die making a brave stand against them? What’s the good of that, huh? Nothing! You’re bloody crazy. Going out there is suicide. Only a moron would do it.” No one had any time to so much as blink before Theo was sent sprawling across the ground, cheek bruised and eye black. Theo tenderly touched his face, bringing his hand away and staring at it perplexedly before craning his neck upwards to glower at his attacker. Draco stood over him, fists balled up so tightly that they were white. Harry noticed that the knuckles of his right hand were turning purple and blue from the blow.

Draco narrowed his eyes at the boy, anger shining fiercely from them. “My parents were *not* ‘off their rocker’. They went out there in the hopes of trying to stop them before they got to us! And I’m *not* going to waste the chances that their possible sacrifice is giving us, so get *off* your back and *help* us, or by Merlin I’ll...I’ll...!” Now red in the face, Draco backed down, unable to adequately describe just what it was he would do to Theo if he was pushed any farther. Theo lay glaring at him, but he finally cracked. Defeat dominated his face, and he stood slowly before turning to the dumbstruck Harry and shocked Blaise. He wouldn’t look at Draco, who was burning acid holes in the carpet with his furious gaze.

“Where do you suggest we go, then?” Harry considered for a moment, before deciding.

“The library. I know Father had a secret passageway installed there in case something like this ever happened.” Theo nodded, still not looking at Draco. Blaise brushed past him and put his hand on the doorknob before glancing back at the window.

“If we’re going to do this, we’d better do it now. We’ve wasted enough of our time here.”

The trip to the library was eerily quiet, giving the battle that was now being raged in the lowest ground levels of the keep. Theo jumped at every noise, eyes darting around edgily for possible escape routes if they were found. Blaise was inhumanly calm, staring straight ahead

and walking with purpose. The same could be said for Draco, though he looked far more nervous than Blaise ever could. Harry felt for him; he was just as scared as the rest of them, probably more so with the knowledge that his family was potentially dead and that, even as they walked, he may be an orphan.

The doors to the library were thankfully unlocked, and Harry cautiously pushed them open just in case there were any Aurors lying in wait to ambush them inside. After a few moments and no attacks were evident, Harry silently crept inside, making a beeline for one of the few bare sections of the wall in the room. The others followed him, each keeping an eye on the different areas of the chamber just in case they were being watched. Harry approached the stone wall, gently pressing his hands against it. Harry nodded, certain that this was the one he was looking for. He turned to Blaise, who was the most serene out of all of them.

“Hey Blaise, can you go to that bookshelf and pull out the third book from the left on the second to last shelf?” Blaise nodded, going to the bookcase nearest their position and pulling the indicated tome out slightly. Harry felt the stone give out under his fingers, and he signaled for Blaise to put it back. He shepherded the others into the dark and damp pathway before entering himself, pulling the unlit torch from the bracket just inside the door as he did so. The stone rumbled into place behind them, effectively sealing them off from the rest of the keep. Harry lit the torch with a single *Incendio* and set off down the spiraling set of stairs, reminding the others to be as quiet as possible.

As they descended the stairway the noise level in the keep grew steadily louder, and Harry knew they were getting closer to the fighting. On the second floor Harry paused, wincing slightly as he heard the sounds of many ornaments being smashed against the tables and tapestries’ being torn down in what he knew was the ballroom, the chamber where they always held their Halloween and Christmas celebrations. Harry glanced over his shoulder to see the other’s terrified faces, and he steeled himself before moving on, knowing it would only get worse from here on out.

At last they reached the ground floor, where the sounds of the battle were the loudest. Harry flinched and resisted the devastating urge to clamp his hands over his ears, instead signaling to the others to walk faster. They trudged through the cramped stone tunnels, Harry searching frantically for the hidden passage in the walls with his free hand, instructing the others to do the same. The group neared a quieter part of the keep, and Harry knew this was the place. He set the torch down on the ground, careful to make sure it stayed lit, and ran both hands over the uneven flagging, searching and wishing fervently to find it so that this nightmare might end. With relief Harry's left hand felt a soft indent in the wall, and he pushed it in eagerly. The stone slid out of place with a grind that made Harry cringe and he stepped out, eying the room to make sure that there was no one there but them. When he was certain they were alone, he gestured for the others to come out. As the last of them—Blaise—stepped out from the passage the stone slid back into place, efficiently cutting off the safest escape route if they were cornered here. Harry gulped down the knot in his throat and tried not to think about that. He scuttled closer to the door, gently putting his ear up against it and listening carefully to the sounds outside. They were occupying a small, hidden chamber off the left side of the Entrance Hall, where Harry knew it was the most terrible besides the grounds. Harry would have liked to wait out the worst of it before leaving, but he knew that it wasn't an option. At any time now the secret tunnel might be discovered and they pursued, and if they were caught here now there was no hope for them. So Harry, turning to his friends and conveying with quivering hands what he was about to do, hesitantly pushed the door open and peeked outside.

No one was looking in their general direction, which was a good thing. Harry darted out of the room and into the safety of the nearby shadows, watching as one by one his friends did the like until they were all standing behind one of the thick pillars that held up the ceiling. Harry gestured to the next pillar, which was twenty feet away, and took another frightened look around the room. No one had noticed them, so Harry gathered what little courage he had left and ran full out for the next column, hoping beyond hope that no one saw him. He dived behind the marble shield, and after a moment of waiting he wasn't dead, signaled for the others to do the same.

They played this hide and seek game for a time, darting in and out of their sheltered havens to make a mad dash for the next fortification nearer to the entryway. At last they were hiding in the dark besides the open doors that led to the lawn, and Harry snuck a glance out them.

There were many people battling out there, and Harry knew, with a feeling of dread twisting his gut, that they would have to go out there. Harry turned to them with a grave face and Theo—who had already narrowly avoided so many nervous breakdowns since this trial had started—collapsed to the floor, shaking so badly Harry feared for a brief moment he may give them away. Blaise looked as calm as ever, silent acceptance of their task shining from his eyes. Draco was stoic, only his grit jaw and clenched fists signs of his discomfort. Harry helped Theo to his feet, telling him softly that everything would be fine, before he turned to the front door. It was now or never.

The group of four rushed out onto the blood-soaked lawns before they could lose their nerve, determinedly ignoring the dead wizards littering the ground around them, even as they jumped over the corpses and raced to the edge of the wood. Theo was green in the face by now, and Draco looked like he was losing the battle to keep his cool. Harry slowed down a bit so that they could catch up with him. He wanted them all to be in a group; it was too easy to lose someone in this throng of death.

Harry yelped as he felt a hand dig into his shoulder and cause him to jolt to a halt, and he looked up to see the gleaming white mask of a Death Eater staring down at him. Theo, Blaise and Draco skidded to a stop right behind him, looking up at the masked wizard with fearful uncertainty, but unmistakable relief. The Death Eater's eyes narrowed down at Harry.

"What in the *name* of *Merlin* are you doing out here, you fool of a boy? You should be inside, where it's safer!" Harry nearly melted from the overwhelming sense of reprieve. It was Severus.

"They got in, and we had to leave before they got us." Harry explained, temporarily able to forget the war waging around them as

he basked in the comfort of having a familiar adult around. Severus stared at him, glanced at the besieged keep, and then back at Harry.

"You mean to tell me," he began in a low, carefully even voice, "that there was not a *sole* guard assigned to you?" Harry shook his head, realizing for the first time that they hadn't. This struck Harry as odd. Surely Father would have ordered them a guard?

Severus swore vulgarly and began to drag him to the edge of the wood, the other children following closely at his heels. "Unthinkable," he muttered in disgust, "that not a *single* one of those bumbling idiots had the brain to watch you! How did you get down here without being killed?" Harry told him about the secret passageway and Severus fell silent, contemplating this new piece of information.

Harry only now realized that they were in the forest. Harry looked up at Severus in confusion as the man stopped and let go of Harry's shoulder, and his attention was drawn to Draco as the boy let of an ecstatic yell.

"Father! Mum! You're alive!" Harry followed Draco's bounding form over to two hunched figures, both being treated by half-skilled temp medics at one end of the clearing. Harry felt a smile tug at his face as Draco tackled his mother in a tight hug, refusing to let go. Theo raced after him, relief evident on his features as he, too, jubilantly greeted his parents, who were resting next to Draco's. Blaise kept close Harry's side, choosing instead to stay with him rather than searching for his own family. Severus stalked off to Lucius, and the two boys trailed him closely. The blonde man looked up as Severus paused in front of him.

"How is everything here?" Severus asked quietly. Lucius rotated his injured shoulder slightly, scowling in distaste.

"Half our forces are down," he replied, gesturing with his good arm to the multitude of injured Death Eaters around him. "Those that aren't injured are either still out there fighting or lying dead on the ground. It was a very good thing indeed those reinforcements arrived when they did, otherwise this battle would have been over long ago." Severus nodded, having seen the bloodshed himself. He tilted his head to the side slightly, sparing a small glance at Harry.

“What of the Dark Lord? No one has seen him yet today, have they?” Lucius looked at Harry for a moment before turning to Severus again.

“He was preparing to go out and fight himself when I left him to defend the hold. If he held true, he is more than likely out there in the battle.” Severus stared at him.

“What in the name of Merlin...why on earth would he go out there when he knows we stand no chance of winning, even with his aid?” Lucius turned to watch Draco and his wife for a moment before giving Harry a guilty and slightly apologetic look.

“He knows we cannot hope to win, but he had charged me with getting his heir out of the keep before they were found. Unfortunately, I got hit by I could do so and when I next awoke I was here, being treated.” Well, Harry thought, at least that explained why there had been no guard. Severus’ face twisted with an emotion Harry could not identify.

“So he knows he will more than likely go down fighting, and as such entrusted you to keep his heir out of trouble.” He spat. “Well, at least Harry is safe. As long as he stays here he will be fine.” He turned to Harry, but the boy was not there. He whirled around, eyes widening as he saw the boy rushing off back to the lawns recklessly.

He panicked. “Harry! You foolish child, did I not tell you to stay here? Harry!” he swore and dashed after the kid, knowing that it would be his head if anything happened to him.

Harry stumbled out of the forest before picking himself back up again and racing all the more swiftly to the fight ahead of him. What was Father thinking? There was no way that Harry would let him do something this stupid. It wasn’t like him at all!

Harry pushed his way through the crowd, shouting for the man in the hopes that he might hear him. Harry was suddenly knocked over as an Auror was sent careening past him, and Harry unsteadily rose to his feet before looking around in despair. There was no way he could find him in this mess. Unless...

Harry held his hand out before him. “*Point Me.*” His hand jerked to the northeast and Harry followed it eagerly, his sense of purpose renewed.

Severus burst out of the trees and looked around, hoping to find some sign of where the boy had gone. When he didn't see him he frowned and took out his wand, performing the same spell that Harry had used to find the boy. He chased off in his direction, wondering what possessed the child to be so foolhardy. Had he no sense of self-preservation at all? Idiot! Severus resolved as he expertly wove in and out of the mass of battling wizards to give the boy a firm tongue-lashing next he saw him.

Harry staggered into a sudden clearing in the mass of combatants, and Harry stared in horror and awe at the sight before him.

Father was dueling viciously with an old man that Harry recognized instantly as Albus Dumbledore—the godfather that the Potters had assigned to him. Harry stood stock-still, watching uncomprehendingly at the battle before him. Harry jerked in surprise as he felt a hand fall on his shoulder for the second time that day and looked up to see Severus glaring down at him, incensed.

“*Merlin*, what were you *thinking*, child? Do you know what could have happened to you out here? Do you?” he asked, shaking Harry by the shoulders in the hopes it would get through to him. Harry opened his mouth to reply but a triumphant shout behind him cut him off. He spun on his heel, and grief ripped its way through him.

Dumbledore stood over his father's fallen body, conquest shining in his bright blue eyes. Harry shook, and then lurched forward in an attempt to get to him, but Severus snagged the boy by the robes and held back.

“FATHER!” he screamed, clawing like a caged animal at the air in front of him. Severus tugged viciously on his clothing and hauled him away from the scene as fast as he could. All that Dumbledore saw as he spun at the sound of the cry in alarm was a black-robed wizard leading something away. He frowned but dismissed it, smiling

benignly as loud cheers rose up through the crowd. The Death Eaters, seeing that their leader had fallen, scattered and pushed their way out of the mob, intent upon escaping. Harry slashed with his fingernails at Severus, screaming himself hoarse with anguish as wet tears streaked down his dirt covered face. Severus ignored and just forced him all the more fiercely towards the sanctity of the wood.

When the two of them finally reached the clearing where the injured had been taken only Harry's friends and their families remained. Theo, Draco and Blaise rushed to him, bursting with how glad they were to see him before they were stilled in their tracks, staring in shock at the tears coursing down Harry's visage. Their relatives led them away, giving Harry respectful privacy as they attempted to explain to their children what happened. Severus released Harry and stepped away, but Harry would have none of it. He tackled the man, pounding his fists into the Potion Master's chest in denial.

"NO! No, it didn't happen! He's not dead! He ISN'T!" he screamed harshly, sobs wracking his body as he shook his head, refusing to believe it. *"He didn't! I know he didn't! He...He..."* Harry wept harder, sliding off the man and instead grounding his hands into the soil. *"He...He isn't..."* words failed him. Harry sat there, not caring that they saw him cry as he sobbed miserably in the dirt. His friends hovered a few feet away, unsure of what they should do. Severus stood stiffly, re-adjusting his robes as he raised an eyebrow at Harry's sorrow.

"You are acting like a petulant child," he snapped, still not over the fact that Harry had the nerve to do something like tackle him. *Really!*

Lucius came to stand beside Severus, ignoring the weeping boy sprawled listlessly across the forest floor.

"We must leave. It will not be long before they check this place for survivors." Severus nodded and they both turned to observe Harry. "Someone will need to look after him." Lucius remarked slyly. Severus immediately backed away and Lucius couldn't help but chuckle. "I was never considering you to be a potential candidate,

Severus. No need for that.” Narcissa came to stand behind him, looking down in pity at the anguished child.

“We can take him,” she offered. “he is good friends with Draco and we have plenty of room.” Severus eyed the two for a moment, revolving on the spot to watch Harry as he finished his sobbing, now only sniffing and moaning every now and then in despair. He nodded.

“We need to leave quickly, then.” He said. As the rest of the small group moved away to Apparate themselves from the scene and the Malfoy family gathered the unresisting Dark Heir Severus stole one last look towards the keep.

“So it’s over then.” He whispered into the wind quietly before he left to report to Albus as quickly as he could. There was damage control to take care of and he didn’t want to be the one to have to do it.

DARK LORD DEFEATED!

By: Rita Skeeter, special correspondent

It’s true. After a long time hidden under the shadow of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s terrible reign, he has finally been defeated. Albus Dumbledore, current Headmaster of Hogwarts, Supreme Mugwump, Order of Merlin First Class—among other things—has freed us from the shadow of dark times, taking the burden of such a task off of the small shoulders of Christopher Potter, Prophesized Child and only son of renowned wizard and witch couple James and Lily Potter...

FOUR DEATH EATERS SENTENCED TO AZKABAN!

Today four Death Eaters—Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange and Barty Crouch Jr.—have all been convicted for the torture of well-known Aurors Frank and Alice Longbottom and wrongful aiding of the Dark Lord. The sentence is life-long, and is to be carried out later this evening. The Longbottoms’ son, Neville Longbottom, has been sent to live with his grandmother Augusta

Longbottom and is currently receiving treatment for mental trauma after witnessing his parents being tortured to insanity. He will still be attending Hogwarts next year and we can only hope the poor boy can pull past this ordeal...

Chapter Fourteen: Aftermath

A sigh escaped from the burgundy bundle resting on the queen-sized, plush feather mattress dominating one wall of the large, cozy chamber. Harry pushed his way out of the cocoon his restless tossing and turning had created and smoothed out the comforter before flopping down on it, arms folded underneath his chin. He gazed blankly at the crinkled *Daily Prophet* crunched out in his fist, absently folding one corner of it over and over again. Harry groaned and threw it violently against the opposite wall where it bounced and rolled to a stop on the lush carpet. He turned over onto his back, moving his hands behind his head and staring at the spackled, immaculate cream ceiling despondently.

Father's dead... It was so hard to accept! The mere thought that someone like him could be taken down so easily...A sob wrenched at his throat as moisture flooded his eyes and he snatched the maroon and white pillow from the head of the bed and pressed his face into it. He rolled over onto his side and held it to him tightly, the silky material drowning out the sound of his heart-breaking weeping. He felt the salty wetness of his tears cling to the pillow, sticking it to his soft skin and ripped it away from him before tossing that, too, across the room with as much force as he could. He leaned against the mahogany headboard, a sad sigh gushing from his mouth. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek and forehead to the cool, refreshing wood and tiredly wiped the evidence of his despair from his features. He stayed like that for a long time, only the shifting sun against his curtained window showing that the day was passing.

Sometime around the afternoon the door to his room creaked open soundlessly and Harry's eyelids twitched, but he didn't move from where he had slipped sideways and fallen asleep on the bed. Harry felt a chilly, hard *something* brush against his hand, and he jerked awake in surprise, toppling off the side of the bed. A slightly amused hiss snapped his head up from where it had landed on the rug and he stumbled to his feet, staring at disbelief at the large serpent that rested on the warm mattress.

"Nagini!" He grabbed her and hugged her tightly despite the strangled sound she made. She watched him with shining golden eyes as he crawled up next to her, his face still split in a joyous grin.

"It issss good to ssssee you too, ssssnake child. Did you think that I would leave you alone?"

"No, of coursse not, but...Nagini, I haven't seen you in ssssuch a long time! How have you been?" He snatched her up in a bone-breaking hug again. *"Wait until Father hearsss! He'll be..."* he trailed off and a depressing atmosphere pervaded the closed chambers. He gently set her down on the bed again, instead choosing to clutch the comforter to his chest and bury his head in it dejectedly. Nagini watched him, sorrow evident in her scaly features.

"It issss not your fault, Harry...Massster chosssse to do ass he did...He would not have done any lessssss. Don't be upssset." She brushed the end of her tail against his forehead lightly, attempting to offer what little solace she could. Harry lifted his head so he could barely see her over the comforter.

"I...I know he...he did it for a reassssson...but..." he sighed before untangling himself from the claret quilt and faced her, his face empty and disheartened. *"I...sssstill missss him...Issss that...wrong?"* If a snake's face could do it, Nagini's might have collapsed into an understanding look. Instead, though, she wound her body around him in a hug and Harry buried his face in her scales.

"I know, ssssnake child...I know...You ssstill have me. I will not leave you, child." Her tail stroked his hair in reassurance. Harry sniffled but didn't look up.

"I know you won't, Nagini. I don't know what I'd do if you left, too, sssso...thankssss..."

"No need to thank me, child. I'm your mother, after all."

"...and so we can now begin this meeting, which, thankfully, shall be the last, if we can help it. Who would like to open the floor?"

Severus stiffened slightly and gathered his composure close to him, wrapping it about his tall frame in the hopes that no one could see his discomfort. His onyx eyes darted around the room, taking in the expressions of everyone around the table, noting who seemed apprehensive and who didn't. Moody was giving his report of the battle, and most of the members seated around the table were nodding and muttering in agreement to everything he said. Severus resisted the urge to sneer at them. Fools.

Albus turned to him, shooting him a warning look from behind his half-moon spectacles. Severus sat up straighter and blanked his face, vowing not to let even the Headmaster find anything with which to incriminate him.

"Thank you for that, Alastor. Severus, why don't you pick up where he left off?" Albus gave him a grandfatherly smile and the entire Order watched him and Severus slowly and carefully stood, as though facing down a dangerous predator and sudden movements would provoke it. Outwardly he was calm and collected, but internally the man was sweating bullets and cursing whatever god thought it was entertaining to put him in such a position. He adjusted his robes with a slight shrug of his shoulders as he straightened up, hoping and clawing at any reason at all he could stall this confrontation. He was about to pass on his turn for the moment, but the piercingly calculating look on Albus' face stopped him. *Meddling old man.*

"I was stationed in the Entrance Hall of the Dark Lord's headquarters at a quarter to six to wait for the ambush to begin," he started smoothly, his face the perfect mask of indifference. He hoped he wasn't condemning anyone he cared for with this...Especially not Harry... "When the attack began I was to take out as many Death Eaters as possible from my position near the doors, then move out to the lawn to aid the rest of you..."

He continued on as calmly as he could, refusing to look at anyone in particular as he did so. At one point (where he had explained the sudden influx of more Death Eaters to the battle, though everyone already knew that) Albus nodded.

“I suspected as much...But I was under the impression that the Dark Lord had an heir. Did you happen to find him?” Albus’ gaze landed squarely on him, every twitch of his muscles and fidget he made judged. The room became stifling, everyone holding their breath in shock and scrutinizing him just as closely as the Headmaster himself was.

Here it is, the test. He could only pray to Merlin he didn’t fail this, for Harry’s sake. “No, I didn’t. However, I met up with one other of his elite circle, and received the news that he had been in charge of rescuing the heir from the keep and getting him out of danger. I was told that they the heir was hit with a stray Killing Curse and he instead chose to regroup with me and others.” He dismissed the skeptical looks he was receiving from around the room and instead met the gaze of the Headmaster, allowing him to poke into his mind as he concentrated on the memories of Lucius wounded in the clearing, telling him of his mission to rescue Harry, mixing it in with the memory of ‘glancing’ the boy darting through the crowds of combatants, dodging various spells, and hoped it convinced the man.

Albus analyzed him for a moment, before slowly nodding in acceptance of his tale. It took all of Severus’ willpower not to let out a great swoosh of air in relief, instead lowering himself stiffly back into his chair, keeping his gaze on the Headmaster so he wouldn’t have to see the sneering countenances of the bungling idiots that were Potter and Black. Severus watched distantly as the older man conducted the rest of the meeting, putting to rest any rallying cries to hunt down the Heir with a firm statement of his confirmed death. He had bought precious time for the boy now, but he had a sneaking suspicion that such a break would not last long.

The empty shot glass slammed deftly onto the scuffed surface of his work table, even as Severus leaned back into his chair and rubbed his temple with his hands. Normally he wasn’t a drinking man, but he felt that this occasion called for it. He hauled himself heavily to his feet, shuffling without his usual grace over to the bookshelf. He pulled down the most promising tome and scuffled back over to the desk, sitting down again before cracking the book open and grabbing the nearest quill. He had to begin planning for the new school year while

he still had the energy to do it. With all the revamps to society going on now that the Dark Lord was defeated, he would have little time to spare for such mundane things as planning his classes. He gave one last longing look to his shot glass and the half-full decanter of brandy sitting just within reach before burying himself in his work.

Harry trudged dejectedly down the ornately crafted marble and granite halls of Malfoy Manor, so immersed in his sorrow that he didn't even stop to admire the beauty of the architecture around him. He stopped before an oak door and opened it without bothering to knock, knowing that Draco wouldn't mind.

Draco looked up from the book he was reading, marking his place and setting it aside before hopping off the armchair by the fire. He strolled up to meet him, eyeing his ruffled appearance in slight concern.

"You look like something the Kneazle dragged in, Harry. Didn't you get any sleep at all?" Harry said nothing. Draco, sighing in exasperation, seized him by the arm and dragged him over to the arcing window in the wall, forcing him into the window seat firmly before crossing his arms, gazing down at the defeated boy expectantly.

"I'm fine, Draco. I'm just tired." He leaned back in the seat, not really feeling the soft sensation of velvet pillows underneath his head. Draco scoffed and took the seat next to him.

"You're not fine. You look like the undead, and that's putting it lightly." He examined his friend carefully before saying softly, "You're still depressed over His death, aren't you?"

Harry's eyes flashed with a sudden danger as he sprang to his feet, pacing like a caged animal. "What do you think, Draco?" he snapped venomously. "You remember what it felt like so much as *thinking* that your parents were dead. Well, my father *is* dead, and he's *not* coming back! I've lost the only family I have, and there's nothing I can do about it!" Draco watched him pace furiously before cautiously sliding from his seat.

"You've still got Nagini and even me, Blaise and Theo, don't you?" he asked slowly, not really willing to piss the boy off any more than he

already was. Harry calmed down greatly, gazing at him with a steady stare.

“...You’re right, I do still have you guys and Nagini...” he sighed and stopped his pacing completely, not shifting his stare off of Draco. “But Father was the one who took me in, and taught me how to use my magic. How am I supposed to forget something like that?”

“I’m not saying you have to forget him! I’m just saying, give it a rest. He did what he did for a reason and I’m sure he knew what he was doing. I mean, he wouldn’t just leave you alone, simple as that, right?” Harry looked past the nervous blonde and swept his eyes over the flowing lawns of Malfoy Manor thoughtfully.

“Yes...He wouldn’t just leave me as simple as that...” a small, almost invisible smile tugged at the edge of his mouth. “He must be coming back sometime. He’s got to.”

“Hey, guess what, sport? He’s gone! You’re free!” merry laughter echoed around the cavernous room as James picked up Chris from his spot by his mother’s side, spinning him in the air with a energy that hadn’t been seen in him in years. Chris laughed with him, struggling to get down as Lily smiled lovingly at the two.

“Put me down, Dad! I’m too old for that.” He broke free and landed with a stumble on the carpet, returning his mother’s smile. James grinned at him.

“You’re never too old for that, kiddo. But you know...” he put a hand to his lower back and hunched forward, contorting his face in false pain, “you’re way too heavy for me. Almost broke my back trying to pick you up.” Chris rolled his eyes at him and hugged his uncle Sirius, joy evident in his features. Sirius hugged him back.

“Congrats, Prongs Jr. Now you can play Quidditch whenever you want!” Lily’s smile turned into a scowl and the two laughed at her teasingly conversing about the latest and most dangerous Quidditch moves they couldn’t wait to try out. Remus shook his head in exasperation of the duo’s antics from his spot in the corner before returning back to his book. Those two would never change. Chris

glanced at him, shrugging. Uncle Remus was always detached like that, always reading books instead of having fun. He liked Uncle Sirius much better, anyways, he reflected as the man in question ruffled his hair lovingly, a roguish grin mirroring on his face, the one Chris knew was probably plastered on his features as well.

As James snatched his son up in a tight hug again, Lily moving to join them, Sirius spotted Remus sulking in the corner of the room. A slight frown marred his face and he walked over to him, casting a glance every now and then to make sure that the three behind him hadn't noticed.

"What's wrong, Moony?" he asked softly. The werewolf sighed heavily and put his book aside.

"It's nothing, really." Sirius' eyes narrowed down at him and he sat next to his long time friend on the couch, wondering what in the name of Merlin could have him so down. He glanced back at the Potters and a sad realization came to him.

"...It's Harry's birthday today too, Moony. Is that it?" the suddenly despondent look on Remus' face gave him his answer. "Look, Moony, it's in the past. There's nothing we could do for him then, and there's nothing we can do for him now. Don't worry over it. I'm sure he's somewhere where he's loved. I mean, who wouldn't love Harry?"

Remus cut short Sirius impromptu, albeit slightly comforting, rambling with a gesture to the three still celebrating carelessly across the room. "But look at them. They're so happy, and they still don't care that Harry's gone."

Sirius sighed, rubbing his forehead. They'd had this conversation many times before. "They've already moved on, Remus. I'm sure they still miss him, but they've gone on with their lives. You should, too. I miss him, but I try my hardest not to dwell on it. What good will it do?"

Remus watched the Potters emotionlessly, not believing a word that his friend said. Sirius didn't see past his friendship with them, didn't understand what Harry had been through with these people. How could he ever forget the boy when he haunted his every other thought? He knew Harry was never going to come back, but some

small part of him couldn't help but hope. It seemed everyday that he was the only one who still cared about the boy. If only he could talk to him once, to ensure he was doing fine...only then would Remus let it rest. But he wanted to make sure that at least one person still would watch over him, even if he may be dead. "What good would it do, indeed?" He said lowly, uncaring that Sirius could hear him. Sirius stared at him oddly, but let it go even as James called him back over to them. He stood and walked over to them, sparing once last glance over his shoulder at Remus. The man had already gone back to reading his book, acting for all the world as if their conversation had never happened.

Chapter Fifteen: Once in a Name...

Harry strolled down the sweeping green lawns of Malfoy Manor, idly inspecting his surroundings. He had been in the Manor for a few days, and after all that time had gotten heartily sick of seeing the same ceiling he saw at all bloody hours of the day, so instead of staying indoors and moping around he had decided to take a walk outside to stretch his legs. The fresh air certainly did him good.

Malfoy Manor, while resplendent in design and architecture, was still no match for the size of his real home, but it didn't bother him. It was a beautiful place, he marveled.

The first floor was used solely for the purpose of public appearances. The wide double doors that separated the Entry Hall from the outer courtyards was thick, shiny dark mahogany and reinforced with titanium steel that was enchanted to dispel most harmful spells that might be used to knock it down. A pure white marble overhang jutted out over the doors and front steps, with were carved out of granite peppered with onyx and quartz; both shined in the light afternoon sun. Two intricately engraved pillars—also a snowy marble—held it up and at the same time lent eloquence to the overall design. The steps themselves branched out in a wide half circle, meeting at the very edge with a meticulously kept stone and white sand pathway that enclosed the elegant limestone twin fountains that decorated the front lawn. Clear, glistening blue water spouted out of the top of each, crashing down with a quiet roar back into the deeply embossed pools that made up the base. The pathway reached beyond them and curved to the sides, leading to the verandas that guarded the border of the front courtyards like statues to a library. They themselves were made of a similar construction to the front door area, but a shimmering dark green shingled over the roofs and swooped down to about ten feet above the ground. Porch furniture, all particularly tasteful for outdoor fixtures, rested in the shade the sturdy covering offered.

Past the pathways was the open lawn, where Harry was now. They were wide and unencumbered by the designs that outfitted the rest of

the home, but were just as lovely. Black steel gates closed off the Manor from the outside world far off in the distance, flanked by the same sturdy white marble that was so reminiscent the rest of the home. Masterfully placed trees—mostly oak, though there was the occasional elm among them—lined the outer rims at almost sporadic intervals; sometimes a rogue flower bush popped out here or there, but Harry felt that the wildness of the bushes lent the place a certain authenticity that carefully kept gardens couldn't.

The Malfoys didn't keep a Quidditch Pitch; Draco had complained crudely a few years back that his mother considered such a thing a horrible addition to the home. As Harry cast his gaze across the lawn part of his disagreed; a Quidditch Pitch would make this place far cozier than it was, though no less striking.

After a short time in the heat Harry, beginning to show signs of perspiration, retired back into the manor.

The Entry Hall was just as graceful as the outside. The floors of the home were made of a blend of black, gray and white marble peppered with the same onyx and quartz from the outside steps and reminded Harry wistfully of some parts of the Dark Lord's keep. Just as in the overhang immediately outside, white swirling pillars, also of marble, spiraled up to the ceiling that was at least fifty feet high. A large crystal and silver chandelier hung, shimmering with a pearly radiance, above his head and cast dancing but glowing light on the shining walls of the room which were also, Harry noted with a touch of amusement, made of marble. It seemed that the Malfoys liked consistency.

Deep green velvet tapestries fell from the pillars and walls at regular points, the silver lining glistening in the luminance of the chandelier. Doors, made of the same dark wood as the front ones, were engraved into the walls of the far side of the chamber. Twin sets of staircases, the shape of which as they descended from the top towards the floor somewhat resembling that of a conch horn; they were side by side at the top, though both with separate railings, but swerved out and away from each other before closing in again near the bottom, though space remained in between to get to the door

beyond them. They were carved out of a stone mixture that Harry couldn't identify, but were still beautiful with their oak and mahogany trimmings and sidings. Up on the part of the second floor that was visible another set of stairs spiraled up out of sight, presumably to the third floor, which is where the family and Harry slept and spent a great deal of their time.

The doors off the side of the staircases lead to various other rooms, including the public parlor, guest library and several ready-for-use offices, among other things. Doors to the verandas, Harry knew, were in the parlor and library for easy access to the outside. The door in-between the stairs, but still back against the wall, lead to the drawing room, underneath which Harry knew from a very reliable source Lucius kept a myriad collection of dark and dangerous artifacts. Another door, to the immediate left of the drawing room and almost invisible in the shadows led to the dungeons, where the Potions lab—someplace Harry was keen to spend most of his time—was kept, along with the dueling chambers for practice, the kitchens/house elf quarters, and (Harry shivered from long suppressed memories) the dungeon cells themselves.

Harry tried to avoid them when he could.

On the second floor lay the more reserved rooms. The stairwell to the second floor branched off to the right and the left. To the left, at the very end of the hall, was the guest parlor, set aside for the more...*valued*...visitors. Double doors in the back of the parlor led to a balcony that was just over the veranda roofs. Immediately across from the parlor was the ballroom, which took up, to Harry's absolute astonishment, half the floor. He figured that they must entertain often, if they kept such a large chamber ready for use at all times.

Down the right of the corridor lay the guest suites. There were nine in total, each equipped with private baths.

The third floor was the last floor and saved solely for family and the most honored visitors. The first room on the floor was Draco's; it was a fairly large room with its own balcony and private bath. Unlike Harry's it had a window seat—a fact that Draco constantly lorded over Harry's head, to the boy's immense annoyance. To the right of

Draco's quarters was the family drawing room and parlor, which, in Harry's mind, was self-explanatory.

Directly across from the parlor and drawing room was Harry's own suite. It was, to Harry's satisfaction and Draco's irritation, larger than the blonde's and also had its own balcony and bath, except Harry's balcony oversaw the front lawns, where Draco's oversaw the back.

Next to Harry's room was the boy's own personal library. Draco spent little, if any, time in there as he had hoarded all his own texts into the many bookshelves of his room and guarded them as jealously as a dragon its treasure; Harry felt Draco was living up to his name. Harry smiled slightly as he entered the library. Due to the fact that Draco was never here it seconded as Harry's office, which pleased the boy greatly.

The parents' quarters were on the far end of the hall and had the same furnishings as the boys', but theirs was far larger, though that was to be expected. Their balcony also overlooked the front lawns, and Harry had only been able to glimpse inside once when he had knocked on the door to talk with Narcissa and had snuck a look past her.

Lucius' office was across from there as well as his library. It took up almost a quarter of the floor and Harry had yet to be able to venture within, though he ached to do so. He could only imagine all the books that must be contained there.

The only room—if it could be called that—left on the floor separated Harry's from the elder Malfoys'. It was an open-air deck with a large balcony that dwarfed all others in the home. It had similar furnishings to the verandas down on the lawn, but it did not have the same shade they did, so Harry rarely went there. Draco, however, loved the place and haunted it as oft as possible. Harry shrugged; to each his own.

Harry flopped down into the large plush armchair that rested before his desk in the library, fiddling absently with a quill that lay by a used piece of parchment. Lucius had managed to procure him a letter from Hogwarts using his position as school governor, but Harry had the task of coming up with a new alias by which he could go. After all, it

wouldn't be wise to just waltz into the place and practically announce to the whole wizarding world that he was the Dark Heir.

No, Harry thought. He had to come up with something new and original. He tapped the end of the quill against his chin, ignoring the ink splotches that spread and dripped from his stained skin as he did so. What would work? Nothing that could possibly indicate his association to the Dark Lord, for sure. He bit his lip and cast his gaze out the window back of the room, wondering blankly.

What could he use? Nothing generic; he didn't want to be obvious about it. He was going with the status of being a half-blood, as he was, so something out of the ordinary but not completely out there was in order. He sighed and rubbed his temples. How in the name of Merlin was he supposed to do this? He had no experience with such things. He slipped off his chair and began to wander about the stacks of books lining to walls. Perhaps they could help him in his search...

By the time he was done Harry had accumulated a large pile of tomes on his desk, the legs of which were creaking slightly under the immense weight. He hopped back into his chair and pulled the nearest one closer to him, simply titled "*Great Wizarding Authors*". He flipped idly through the thick pages, making notes on a new scrap of parchment of interesting names he found within. One in particular caught his eye:

'Eldred Worpel, author of: Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst Vampires...' Interested, Harry held his hand up in the air.

"Accio 'My Life Amongst Vampires'." Harry waited a few moments and finally a medium sized tome flew from the maze of shelves and he caught it deftly before setting it down and flicking through it. About halfway through the book Harry paused and picked up his quill, dipped it in ink and wrote on the clean parchment beside him 'Damien'. A creepy grin spread across his face and he tried hard to suppress it. He could just imagine the looks on those fools' faces if he registered under a name some vampires had...A slightly mad giggle threatened him but he pushed it down and continued his search, the silly grin still dominating his features. This was becoming quite fun...

Just as the sun began to sink beyond the horizon Harry had an adequately long list of possible names. He smiled slightly as he looked down at them.

'Damien, Marquis—' he mentally crossed that one off the list; it was too out there... *'Nathaniel, Armand, Maxwell, Cain, Reyes, Leonardo...'* he crossed that one off, too. *'Kraig, Blake, Vladimir...'* he laughed slightly at the irony but reluctantly crossed that one off; it would draw a *lot* of unwanted attention... *'Darrien, Zane.'* He leaned back, surveying the list again. There was plenty to go off of, to be sure, but he felt he needed a second opinion. He raised his hand and with a snap of his fingers a house elf popped into the library, already bowing. The creature had bat-like ears, long fingers just like Binky's and large green tennis ball eyes peering anxiously over a long, thin nose.

"Dobby, can you go fetch Draco for me?" Dobby bowed, his long nose almost touching the floor.

"I will go and fetch Master Draco for Master Harry, sir." Harry smiled slightly as the house elf left. He reminded him of Binky. It was too bad she hadn't made it out of the keep in time; he had been somewhat fond of her, in a twisted sort of way.

His musings were cut short by Draco storming into the room, his normally pale face pink from displeasure.

"What?" he hissed, and Harry had the distinct impression he had caught the boy at a bad time. He looked over his disorderly appearance and raised an eyebrow.

"Do I even want to know where you were?" Draco huffed but said nothing, instead stiffly taking the chair opposite Harry's.

"Forget that. Why'd you get that thing to come and get me instead of getting me yourself?" Harry rolled his eyes and sighed. It was obvious his friend was in a bad mood today. Harry plucked the list of names from its place amongst the mess of his desk and handed it to the fuming blonde.

"I need to find a name to go under when I go to Hogwarts with you. There's a list. I wanted a second opinion." Draco's ire slowly evaporated as he scrutinized the parchment, quickly turning to dark amusement.

"Planning to frighten them with a vampire name?" Harry smirked slightly and after a moment of silent debate Draco fingered the parchment.

"I like this one." Harry leaned over the desk to see the one Draco was indicating and his eyebrows rose again.

"'Blake'?" Draco nodded.

"It was on your list, wasn't it? Besides, it's similar to my name. Easy to remember." Harry chewed his lip thoughtfully but shook his head in the negative.

"I don't really like it too much. 'Damien' is more like it." Draco's eyes narrowed in concentration as he looked between the list and Harry.

"I can see why you'd say that, it does sort of fit you..." he examined the parchment again. "Have you decided on a last name?"

"Yeah. 'Morgan'. It goes with most of the list and, as you said, it's 'easy to remember'." Draco eyed him oddly for a moment.

"Have you considered a middle name?"

Harry faltered. "Well, no, not really," he conceded. "But I didn't think I'd need one."

Draco scoffed. "You should have one. You're still half pureblood and all purebloods have a middle name." Draco looked over the list with a critical eye, thinking of anything that could go with the last name of Morgan. Harry leaned back and watched, amused by how into this his friend was. After a half hour of silence, however, Harry was starting to grow impatient.

"Are you going to take all day?" Draco cast him a chilling look.

“Do you want my help or not?” Harry sighed and resisted the urge to throw his hands up into the air.

“You’re taking forever.” Draco bit his lip before setting the paper down.

“Well, I don’t see anything better, and since you like the idea for the name ‘Damien’ so much I’ll let it slide...” Harry snorted at the blonde’s audacity. “But in compromise the middle name has to be Blake. Agreed?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Damien Blake Morgan...” he stewed over it for awhile. “Damien B. Morgan...” he suddenly smiled. “I like it.”

Draco came very close to beaming, an achievement in itself. “Wicked. Welcome to the fold, Damien.” Harry leaned over to punch his arm, but his smile grew wider.

“That’s Mr. Morgan to you, Draco.”
